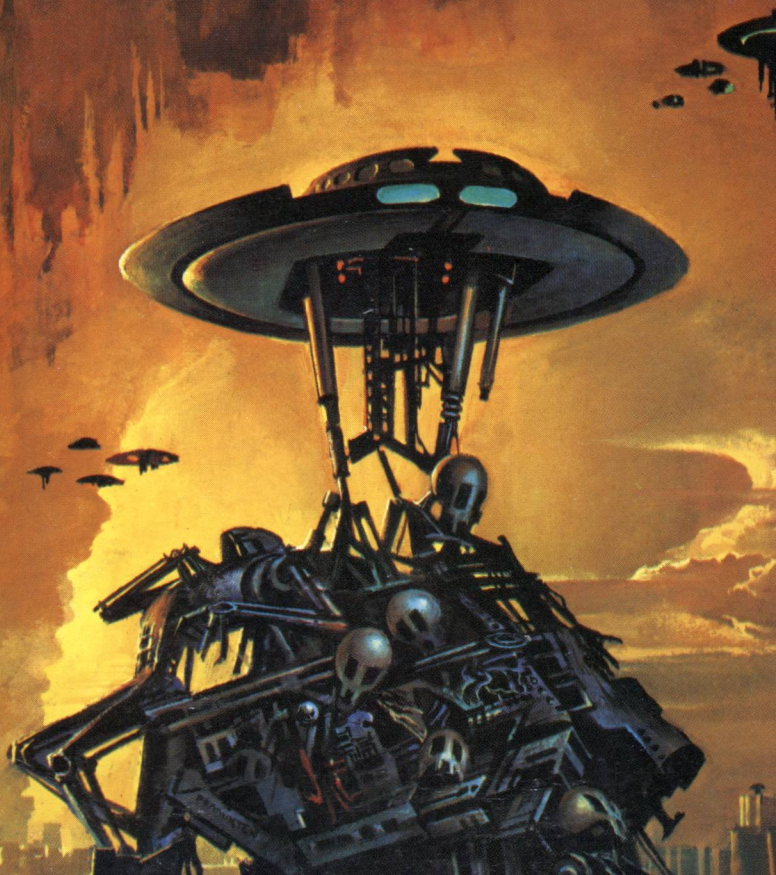


New Worlds 6

THE SCIENCE FICTION QUARTERLY
Edited by Michael Moorcock and Charles Platt



About the editors

Michael Moorcock was born in London in 1939. He published his first fantasy story at the age of sixteen and has since earned himself a reputation as a master of science fiction. Editor of science fiction's foremost magazine *New Worlds*, he is also the author of numerous short stories, poems and novels, including *The Ice Schooner*, *The Shores of Death* and *Behold the Man*, the story which won him the 1968 Nebula Award.

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NEW WORLDS 6

The Science Fiction Quarterly

EDITED BY

Michael Moorcock

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INTRODUCTION

This is the first issue of this current series of NEW WORLDS to be edited jointly by myself and Charles Platt and I am very pleased to see the work of so many younger American writers well represented here. It has always been the ambition of NEW WORLDS to encourage new writers (and to expect fresh, interesting work from established writers). For some years, too, we have been trying to form a critical vocabulary capable of dealing coherently with individual works of imaginative fiction. Our regular critics, John Clute and M. John Harrison, are discovering such a vocabulary. I particularly enjoyed the two pieces of criticism you will read in this issue; in their different ways they manage to explain why so much work published as "science fiction" is unsatisfying and, hopefully, offer clues to writers and would-be writers currently trying to produce better fiction. Perhaps, too, they will show readers how best to appreciate and judge that fiction.

Michael Moorcock

COMING FROM BEHIND

M. JOHN HARRISON

With his cell in ruins behind him, its surviving members by now impaled along the rusty barbed-wire perimeter of some Nastic work camp as an example to the labour force of the London Basin shaft projects, Prefontaine fled north. He had with him a worn belstaff-jacket and a machine pistol, some eight or nine hundred rounds of unreliable seven millimetre ammunition and a terrible emptiness in the softer spaces of his head.

Circumstances had robbed him of his humanity (or so he supposed), but given him in return the priceless energy of despair. He rarely looked over his shoulder; he took no precaution against observation from the air; he invited pursuit. And whenever he thought of the crated components stacked behind him on the bed of the truck, his face worked itself agonisingly into something none of his fellow human beings would have recognised as a smile.

When a blocked air filter held him up in Northampton, he forced himself out of the truck into a fine grey storm of ash to clear it, hunching his shoulders against the wind, haunted by the dead inhabitants of the ruins about him and laughing because he was twenty years too late to do anything for them. When his windscreen ruptured on the derelict motorway at Watford Gap, he set his face against the bitter slipstream and went on. When a child ran into the road on a cold corner by a crumbled hotel in the naked, eroded landscape of the agricultural Midlands, he bit his lip and tried to drive behind it . . .

But, one thin arm flung out before it in horror—mouth wide and lipless, shaped like a segment of orange—it ran back into his path. As he braked, his nearside suspension collapsed, a wall flew madly over his head, a massive impact crumpled the truck, blackness engulfed him.

There were periods of wakefulness, like brief days in a year

of twilight. In one of them a priest was bending over him, whispering something.

"No priest!" he shouted, "no priest!"

Faces gathered about him: big, blind, faceted eyes.

"Mumble, mumble," they whispered, "mumble."

He wept copiously.

"You leave us alone, we didn't ask you to come here."

His leg hurt. He wondered if he'd been betrayed again. He saw his friends draped over the wire, pleading with him. "Where's my truck?" he asked them. He understood that when you have no more hope, you are invulnerable—you share the insensibility of the dead and the power of the living. In his head, the wind mumbled thick-lipped over the smooth, ageless ruins of the Earth.

"The ankle is broken, but the ribs are only bruised," said Bellman, rubbing at a stain on the hem of his cassock. "You were lucky."

Prefontaine shrugged. He stared round the broken, peeling walls. Sour moisture dripped off the plaster, seeped across the floor and under the bed they had put him in. It smelt like a lavatory, the smell of Work Camp A, the smell of the whole human half of the world.

"My truck."

Bellman smiled. "Wrecked, I'm afraid." There was a battered reliquary nailed to the wall above the bed. He got to his feet, leant over to adjust the positions of the figurines, dabbled one finger in the hot wax beneath the candle flame. His wooden crucifix swung from his belt an inch above Prefontaine's head. He straightened up and studied his fingertip absently. "We'll have to see how you come on," he said.

"What about the child?"

"Ah, you avoided her. She will come and thank you personally when you are stronger. She is aware that you put yourself at risk to avoid killing her."

Prefontaine twisted nervously between the rough blankets. "I couldn't bloody help myself. Christ, I wish I'd kept going—I! If you knew how valuable that truck is." He lay still, exhausted by his anger. Dully: "I don't want any bloody blessings from you, Bellman, so keep your fingers still. Put the candle out."

Nevertheless, they brought the child in later, dipping its head, shy, dressed in its best clothes. He moved his head away when

it tried to kiss his cheek. He held up his hand, palm outwards, and clenched it into a fist.

"Remember this," he said. "If I didn't knock you down, it was so you could remember this—" moving his fist gently "—and act on it when you're older. You understand me? You understand what this sign means?" The child began to cry, ran out of the room.

"Despair will eat you up," said the priest. He stood calmly in that dark damp room and said it. Prefontaine felt his lip curl.

"The Nastic will eat you up, Bellman. They've got their feet on your pathetic neck." He rubbed his hand madly across his aching eyes. "They smashed my whole group through some bugger like you. He blew my whole cell, *my whole bloody group*, because he didn't believe in dying."

He tried to get up, groaned.

"I can't stay here. There might be a unit left up in the Pennines."

Bellman pressed him back.

"They will be looking for you if you were involved in a revolt. Stay here until it's safe. What can you do like this?"

Prefontaine clenched his hands beneath the blankets. "Sometimes I find it hard to care," he said. He slept. The Nastic moved gracefully through his head—insectile, complex, implacable . . .

. . . And took him up in a peculiar machine to show him the Earth, raddled like an apple with their great shafts and pits. London, New York, Nogent Le Rotrou, Somali—eight thousand shaftheads with their attendant work camps, scattered meaninglessly across the world—new lava plains, ash cones, the volcanic failures.

"Why are you making us dig holes?" he asked them.

"You are being given a chance to participate in a great cosmic adventure," they said. "A corporate endeavour in which your skills, though minor, can play a real part. Your small contribution enables you to participate with joy. Satisfaction in a job well done should be your aim. Every craftsman rejoices, every wheel turns."

From their factories, vast replicas of themselves, a thousand feet high, had been wheeled—now they were being forced into the completed boreholes at Minsk and Baltimore. In other places, the Nastic took wing, they flew above the pits, emitting high ecstatic musical notes.

"Regretfully, it is part of a design you cannot anticipate," they explained.

They threw him back down to Work Camp A, the seeping walls, the ruins. His dead comrades surrounded him, open-mouthed, empty-eyed.

"The master berates his lazy craftsmen if they are slothful at the wheel. In the autumn field, new smoke rises," announced the Nastic. "Half-complete, the wheel berates its lazy makers—will it not mould itself before them? Do they lack for materials?"

"Betrayed again!" moaned Prefontaine.

Resistance was useless.

A week or two passed. Prefontaine eyed the gathering pools of water, the breached walls and the junk on the reliquary shelf with bleak distaste. Bellman's villagers brought him meals he could rarely eat; Bellman brought him quiet sympathy he didn't want. In his frequent nightmares the Nastic discovered his wrecked vehicle, came at night, clicking and whispering over it spilt cargo. Finally, aided by a stick, he was able to leave the cottage.

The shells of buildings; the rank growths of fireweed and deadnettle; the church with its stub of Gothic tower; the ash drifting in from the fields: the Nastic signature on a one-sided contract. But he was beyond feeling that sort of pain. A big, awkward figure lurching along the gaunt village street with his belstaff-jacket unfastened and flapping in the wind, he went to inspect the damage.

The truck had fetched up against the wall of the hotel, its roof buckled and torn, its engine rammed back into the cab. Emaciated chickens ran in and out of its burst rear doors; a handful of solemn-eyed children in torn pullovers watched him chase them away. He leant on his stick, breathing heavily.

"None of you ever go in there, do you?" he said to the children. They nodded, shifted their feet. "I don't want to find any of you in there, ever." He raised his fist ironically in salute. "Good."

Some of the crates had split on impact: wood shavings and plastic packing had escaped their seams, but their contents were undamaged. He grinned savagely and set about restacking them, wrinkling his nose at the smell of chicken dung. His machine-gun lay in the wreck of the cab, but all his ammunition, including the clip from the weapon itself, had been stolen. Staring

speculatively at the children, he fumbled about behind the ruined dashboard until he found the spare magazine taped to the firewall.

Bits of stained glass hung from the lead lattice of the east window; small draughts fluted and hissed through the nave; up among the beams of the roof, sparrows huddled, spreading their tail feathers nervously. Prefontaine placed himself by the font and jacked a round into the breech of the machinegun. His fingers were cold.

Bellman, at the altar, said, "There are searches. If they find live ammunition here—" His voice carried, clear and unruffled.

"I want it back, Bellman. No more betrayals. Find me some transport and the stuff will leave with me." He tapped the gun on the stone edge of the font.

Bellman turned to face him and began to walk up the aisle, the scrape of his boots echoing round the church. He sat down passively in one of the back pews.

"The only vehicle we have needs attention, perhaps a month's work." From somewhere under his cassock he produced a piece of rag, blew his nose on it. "In that time, the entire village will be at risk. Fifty people. You know, it really is the paper handkerchiefs I miss the most."

"What I have in the back of that van is worth a thousand people. More."

Bellman rearranged his cassock fussily. "Supposing the Penines have already been cleaned out?" he suggested. "What if you're the last, Prefontaine? Supposing there's nobody left to deliver your atomic bomb to?"

Prefontaine bit the inside of his cheek. He limped quickly along the line of pews and prodded Bellman's neck with the machinegun muzzle. "Keep out of the truck," he muttered fiercely. "And keep those bloody kids out of it, too."

The priest chuckled. He rubbed the back of his neck where the gun had made a small circular impression in the flesh.

"You haven't answered my question—"

"I'm as good as dead already. There's nothing left to lose. I'm invulnerable."

"That wasn't quite what I mean. Still." He shrugged. "Very well, then."

Outside, the children were playing a complicated game among the gravestones. They stopped to watch Bellman and Prefontaine go past, and a small girl detached herself from the rest of the group. Walking alongside Prefontaine, she stared up at him

for some moments, then raised one hand, palm outwards, and clenched it into a little, dirty fist.

"Look at her, Bellman," he said. "Take the hint."

The priest sighed. "If she does that during a Nastic inspection, she will be killed." He put his hand on Prefontaine's arm. "As she will be if you are found using the village."

"You've never been in a work camp have you, Father?" Prefontaine whispered wearily. "When her time comes she'll wish above everything else that I'd driven the truck over her head that day."

Hidden behind the large gravestones, other children opened fire with imaginary weapons, taking careful aim.

It was a peculiar time. Rain had laid the dust. Acrid mists enveloped the destroyed landscape. "They are changing the climate," said Bellman, "perhaps even the atmosphere." Small, furtive animals scuttled through the fireweed jungles.

Prefontaine lay on his back in a galvanised iron shed a quarter of a mile out of the village proper, poking up into the enigmatic innards of a vast, rotting Green Line bus. There was nothing fundamentally wrong with it. He unblocked some fuel and air lines, cannibalised some heavy duty hose from his truck, and the work came along quickly. His leg healed.

A disfigured man, unbearably thin and tall, wandered into the village from the south. His face was eaten away round the lips and chin, his skin was like corroded aluminium. He stayed for a week, stumbling about, trying to talk to the villagers. They fed him (a stock response, a reflex accomplished without rancour or sympathy). Prefontaine avoided him, but he came to the door of the cottage one night and stood there looking in.

"Thregh sat caught," he said, screwing up his eyes against the light. "Oh ech helth stat, togh tray: loch ech tray."

"I don't understand you."

He became animated, waving his arms disconnectedly. He was so tall he hit his head on the lintel staggering in. His face was all intimations of skull: mad, awful, nothing to do with the human race at all. He touched the rubbish on the reliquary shelf.

"Nieshkol. Cargle geth!"

He followed Prefontaine from room to room, saying these inescapable, meaningless things. He was wearing a long burlap garment covered with filth. Gazing wildly at Prefontaine, he bent down and took hold of its hem, pulled it up to his neck,

His legs were made of metal, bare and spidery. They had too many joints and appeared to be grafted directly on to the bottom of his rib cage.

He tapped them with his fingernails, producing a hollow, musical sound. "Geth!" he shouted. Then he quietened down and went aimlessly off up the street, bumping into things.

"He suffers a great deal of pain," said Bellman. "The Nastic took him as a child."

"What for?"

"An experiment, a punishment, a game?" The priest raised his hands, palms upwards. "He doesn't know. When they lost interest in him, he became a nomad. He comes through here once or twice a year. He was trying to tell you about a vision. He believes himself to be a prophet or harbinger of some kind. There but for the grace—"

"Don't say it." Prefontaine, seeing visions of his own, shuddered. He stayed in the cottage feeding his anger until the man had left the village, rolling and tottering away north, attempting to control his strange and useless limbs.

He finished his work on the bus: its engine grunted sourly, fired and caught, filled the shed with noise and fumes. He sat grinning behind the big horizontal steering wheel, opening and closing the pneumatic doors, switching the indicators on and off.

"Have your tickets ready please!"

Bellman helped him transfer the stuff from the wrecked truck. They moved it in small loads on a makeshift handcart. Bicycle wheels creaking through the village in the twilight. Prefontaine had discarded his stick and now wore the machine pistol slung round his neck from its strap like a guitar. They were an odd pair, bent over the shafts of the cart, shoving it between the silent houses.

"I can feel them behind me, Bellman." Prefontaine waved an arm at the fog drifting in over the stripped fields. "They're getting closer all the time. They must know I escaped the net by now." He touched the machinegun. "I'm ready for the bastards."

"Are you?"

The fog moved in slow gelid streams on the back of a rising wind. They stood in the doorway of the shed, resting before they went to fetch the final load, the walls of the place flexing and creaking around them. Prefontaine bared his teeth. The pockets of his belstaff were stuffed with spare cartridges; he

took out two or three of them and rattled them in the palm of his hand.

"Yes."

"What will you do if there's no-one left in the Pennines?"

"Put the sodding bomb back together myself. Drive it down their throats in that good old bus of yours and let it off."

"And the reprisals?"

"I'm not a human being any more, I'm a weapon."

They trudged through ragged, dissolving banks of mist with the empty cart. Prefontaine clambered about in the back of the ruined truck, passing crates out to the priest. They worked silently for a few minutes, then:

"God Almighty," said Bellman softly. He stared up into the darkening sky, he shook his head from side to side; he hoisted the skirts of his cassock and scrambled into the truck on his hands and knees. "Keep quite still," he advised, grasping his crucifix. Prefontaine pushed past him and stuck his head out. Drifting over the eroded landscape to the south, like a bloated stupid face seen in the vacuum of a dream, came a Nastic patrol vessel.

"Get back in, get back in," muttered Bellman. "They haven't seen us yet."

Product of some demented organic engineering process, it was a huge concentric spheroid, mottled and lumpy, a vast rotten grapefruit crawling with mould. In places its hull was translucent, vague fluorescences coming and going behind it. Venting great gusts of foul-smelling gas, it hung precariously three hundred feet above the village, moaning like a crushed animal.

"Come on, you sods," invited Prefontaine, thinking of the barbed-wire, the empty eyes, the nightmares of Work Camp A. He settled his elbows firmly and comfortably on the bed of the truck. He put the stock of the machine pistol to his shoulder and picked his spot—

Coming up from behind, Bellman hit him in the biceps with stiffened fingers like bits of iron. His arms went numb and he dropped the machinegun. "Get off me, you bloody moron!" Bellman grabbed him by the collar of the belstaff-jacket and dragged him back into the truck. He brought his mouth up close to Prefontaine's ear and hissed, "What can you do with that little thing? Do you want the whole place wiped out? You couldn't *scratch* it with that—"

Prefontaine squirmed about, kicked out. "Whose side are you

on, Bellman?" His boot hit something soft and Bellman let him go. "Whose bloody side are you on?"

"I'm sorry," said Bellman, "but you had no chance."

Slumped among the crates, they stared sullenly at one another, dishevelled and panting, listening to the moans of the queer machine above. Prefontaine rubbed his arms.

"How long will it stay?"

"It depends. Not long, if they don't suspect you're here." Bellman smiled wanly, fingering a bruise on his cheek. "I should seriously consider whose side *you* are on," he said.

This gnomic statement kept Prefontaine occupied all through the chilly night. He held tight to his gun, eyeing the priest insecurely while the Nastic vessel floated beneath the cloudbase like an unreasonable moon. Bellman shivered and blew into his cupped hands. Neither of them spoke. An hour before dawn, the machine relinquished its position above the village; made a wide circuit of the surrounding area, issuing unpleasant steam; then wobbled erratically off south, rising slowly until it vanished into the dirty sky.

Shivering and stiff, they emerged from the wrecked truck. "I hope you feel safer now," said Prefontaine as unkindly as he could. He slung the machinegun round his neck and, despite the pain in his ribs, refused to let the priest help him finish loading the cart.

Dawn, then: Prefontaine rolling north again, with the bomb safely stowed and his motives uncomplicated. Half a mile out of the village, a thick mist enveloped the coach. Streams of icy vapour invaded the driving position. He was bleary-eyed and tired. With visibility down to four or five yards and the headlights blazing out uselessly, he kept his speed a little above walking pace, determined to have no repetition of the incident with the child.

A tall thin figure assembled itself out of the mist at the side of the road, waving its arms: the disfigured man, his alien legs protruding at odd angles through the threadbare sacking of his coat. Prefontaine stopped, reversed.

"You haven't got very far, then. Neither of us seem to be making much headway."

He stood for a minute by the doors, staring up at Prefontaine, his lipless mouth wet.

"Lagth," he said. He stumbled into the bus, failed to come to terms with his legs, fell into one of the passenger seats. The

wind knocked out of him, he lay there silently, looking at the roof. Dissociated components of the landscape swam past the windows—a skein of rusty wire netting, fence posts covered with fungus, a ditch. The coach groaned on in first gear.

"We might as well be on bloody foot," said Prefontaine, squinting impatiently out into the fog. The disfigured man came up behind him, gripped the back of his seat.

"What is it?"

"Gech och na golt, toch. Loch tray." His eyes were wide, anguished, unfocussed. Air whistled past the edges of his exposed nasal cavity.

"Don't bother me now. Why not sit down?" The wreckage of some kind of military vehicle loomed up out of the fog, rotating down to nothing at the crown of the road. Prefontaine winced. "Just sit down."

"Ghech och loch tray! Loch tray! Golt!" The disfigured man's agitation mounted. He stared hard at Prefontaine, waving one arm. The bus rocked and bumped over a series of ramps and potholes; he lost his balance, clutched at Prefontaine's neck. "Caulk thart nitch!"

Prefontaine choked, struck out. "Let go—" He lost his grip on the steering wheel.

Ponderously, the coach left the road; slowing, rumbled over the grass verge and tipped clumsily over into the ditch. Its off-side wheels reared into the air. The engine stalled. Prefontaine fell out of his seat, the disfigured prophet came down heavily on top of him, shouting "Not but! Thecgh!" Prefontaine eluded his flailing arms, rapped him in the larynx with the heel of his hand. His awful head jerked back, his eyes rolled.

Prefontaine crawled out of the coach, stood scratching his head at the mess. He kicked miserably at the dented bodywork, faced with the long walk back to the village for help. He went to fetch his machinegun. The disfigured man had propped himself up against the steering column, crammed into the driving compartment like a rag doll in a biscuit box, his legs twitching impotently. He gazed steadily at Prefontaine. His left eye was closing up.

"You," he said quite clearly. "You kill us all." He sighed.

"You're a sodding madman, you know that?" said Prefontaine. "That's what you are." And he trudged off.

The outskirts of the village were damp and eerie in the thinning fog. He stood in the road, his ankle aching ferociously,

and listened to the houses. Water dripped from a fractured gutter, fanning out over the wall beneath; doors hung open. He walked down the main street, looking in through the windows; but no-one was there. They might all have left a decade before, on some vain migration into the dustbowls of the east.

Silence drove him off the road and into the fireweed jungles behind the cottages. His composure hung by a thread. Among the weeds, a cat with a cankered face was stalking some small, invisible thing. The metal of the machinegun was beaded with condensation, his hands slipped as he took the safety off.

Click.

The cat shot out of some nettles, looking back over its shoulder. It sat down, eyeing him resentfully.

He travelled the entire length of the village without meeting anybody. From the garden of the last house, he could just see his truck, leaning up against the wall of the hotel. He thought he detected a movement there. He became aware of an under-current of sound, a vague oppression of the ears. Visibility was increasing steadily. He rubbed his hand over his face, imagined suddenly that he was being observed.

He got down on to his elbows and knees and crawled into the cottage; moved the rotting net curtain away from the front window. It fell to pieces under his fingers.

A score of old men and women were lined up in front of the hotel, their faces placid and bucolic, their hands wrapped in bundles of rag against the cold. A shifted foot, a cough—the caved chest of age, the puckered mouth. A few children sidled about near them—rickety, shivering, bored and uncomprehending. In apathetic silence, they stared ahead. The human sector, with its sore eyes and withered forearms.

Prefontaine rested his head on the window pane. He felt divorced, objective; but his knuckles were white on the gun.

Sagging like a perished rubber ball on the tarmac some twenty yards from the villagers: the Nastic patrol vessel. Its inner lights were dim, but the rot still crept over its rind, and thin wisps of vapour escaped its folds and orifices. A filthy smell issued from it.

He broke the window, he brought up the gun.

"This is the price tag on your bomb, Prefontaine," said Bellman irritably from the gloom behind him. "Why did you come back?"

Prefontaine narrowed his eyes. He didn't know what to say. "I needed help. The bus—"

Bellman laughed gently, shook his head.

"You know, I thought for a moment . . . The Nastic assume we are still hiding you. I have twenty minutes left in which to produce you, but I suspect they'll take reprisals even if I do. And if you fire that thing, the people out there will certainly die."

Prefontaine let the gun dangle from its strap. He chewed his thumbnail.

"Don't you think I feel some pain?"

"You're the invulnerable one." Bellman moved to the window, fiddled with the edges of the broken pane. "You have nothing to lose." He worked a long sliver of glass free of the window frame, inspected it judiciously. He swung round to face Prefontaine.

"Others do the losing for you."

He dropped the glass and stepped on it, turned away again. Prefontaine shrugged.

"I won't give up the bomb."

"Ah—" A sudden tension revealed itself in the muscles of Bellman's neck. His skin was like oiled paper stretched over a lamp. "Supposing—" He stared across at the Nastic vehicle. "Supposing I promise to do my best to deliver the weapon?" He folded his arms. "It's you they want. They know nothing about an atom bomb. They didn't even bother with the truck."

"That's speculation. You can't be sure of that."

Distantly: "Look out there. Those are the people you would claim to be fighting for. It's a chance for them."

"It's their freedom I'm interested in—"

"—Not their lives?"

Prefontaine understood that the Nastic had robbed him of nothing. The priest was regarding him with a certain amount of satisfaction. Outside, the hostages had nothing to watch but their feet. "You Jesuit bastard," he whispered. His face worked itself into a desperate approximation of a smile. "I don't want any bloody blessings from you," he warned. He reached out quickly, ripped Bellman's crucifix off, flung it into a corner. "So stuff that."

Without the machinegun, there was nothing left to do with his hands. He stuck them in the pockets of his belstaff-jacket. The mist was breaking up, blowing about on an icy wind; the wet road gleamed before him. When he left the shelter of the cottage doorway, his hair blew into his face. Slowly, he walked

toward the Nastic vessel, trying not to look at the human half of the world.

The Nastic emerged to welcome him, forcing themselves through flexible orifices in the hull of the ship. They stropped their great bent rear legs together, humming.

"The rebellious son returns, the father rejoices: all is calm, all is bright," they said, peeling back their hard grey wing cases. Their faceted eyes glittered.

"When young shoots sprout it can clearly be seen where the snow has thawed." They began to jump insanely back and forth over their peculiar machine, springing high into the air, whistling and clicking. "Does the master not welcome his erring apprentice?" they demanded shrilly.

"Leave these people alone!" called Prefontaine. "It's me you want."

They settled in front of the vehicle, refolded their wings; they faced him, mandibles snapping energetically, gristly membranes flexing. He began to shake all over. The backs of his thighs were wet. "Deceit pains the father, remorse overcomes the child. Oh, oh, oh."

Fluid leaked from their joints. A sphincter formed in the rind of the ship; they fell back, indicating that he should enter.

He fought to keep from vomiting. He stumbled, moaned. He wanted to run.

"*Get down on the floor!*" called a clear, urgent voice from behind him. He stood there, staring about stupidly. Something fizzed over his head. He fell on his face. The Nastic vessel gave a huge hollow grunt and split open like a putrid melon. Vast jets of disgusting fluid spewed out of it; bits of rind were flung into the sky, spinning; brown gases bubbled out of the collapsed sphere. Prefontaine whimpered, gagged, clasped his hands over the back of his head.

The front doors of the hotel swung inwards, the hostages rushed inside. An automatic rifle began to operate from an upper window, clattering and tearing holes in the road off to Prefontaine's left. He writhed away, eyes streaming.

They came running in from the quiet houses, the acrid fields, the fireweed jungles—men, women and children, people he had never even seen in the village—their faces grim, their guns black and oily, their lips peeled back off their teeth. The Nastic were picked up by a storm of smallarms fire and blown twitching through the fumes and filth like dried locusts, crying "Oh! Oh! Oh!" in distant, reedy voices.

Prefontaine, crawling back to the safety of the cottage,

brought up the contents of his stomach. With this raw bile came all the pain he had kept locked into the back of his skull: Work Camp A, the wire, the dead men—the stink and squalor of the Nastic process—the subordination of the Earth. Oh, he fought it, lying there with the reek of the ruptured vessel drifting over his head: he tried to force it back down, to retain his despair, his invincibility. But when it was over, he was able to kneel on the tarmac and weep like a human being.

He was sitting on the doorstep rubbing his eyes when Bellman appeared out of the ruin, carrying a three-inch rocket launcher over his shoulder.

"Thanks for nothing," he said, bitterly. "Did I deserve that?"

Bellman smiled. He put the rocket launcher down, dusted his cassock.

"Let's go and fetch that bomb," he said. "Welcome back to the human race."

"I couldn't bloody help myself."

AN OFFICE MEETING

GILES GORDON

Perkins and I had been talking in some detail about a subject of particular interest to both of us when, in answer to a question of mine, he stopped his reply in mid sentence, or at least before the sentence was completed. The part of the sentence spoken gave me little idea of the sense of the whole.

"Isn't that Dangerfield?" he said in a low voice, nodding his head in the direction of the portly, bearded figure who had a moment before entered the outer office.

"You know Dangerfield, don't you?" he went on, as I hadn't answered.

The man he took to be Dangerfield was wearing some kind of homburg, and the brim of the hat cast shadow down onto his face. In addition, the only window in the room was situated in such a place—in the wall opposite the door—that light flooded in (the sun shining as strongly as it was that afternoon) and was thrown against the man who had just entered the room. The light caused me to frown when I looked at him, trying to establish whether or not he was Dangerfield. Though he was only fifteen or sixteen feet away from me, I couldn't be certain.

"Dangerfield?" I said to Perkins.

"You know. Dangerfield."

"Oh I know him. I know Dangerfield. Oh yes," I further answered, wanting a little more time to be sure of the man. If he hadn't heard what we were saying, he must have heard that we were talking.

There was no secretary in the outer office, and he moved a

couple of steps further into the room, towards the inner office in which Perkins and I conversed. We both watched him approach. Certainly his body was approximately the same shape as Dangerfield's, and as far as I was concerned it could be his. He entered the inner office, and took off his hat. He nodded his large head slightly, in the direction of Perkins and myself, as if not certain which of us he should address. Seeing him standing there bareheaded, I realised immediately that— whoever he was—he was not Dangerfield. There was really no similarity between the faces at all. In fact, this man was more like someone else I knew, at least by sight, but at that moment I couldn't think who he was, or even precisely what he looked like. This man strongly reminded me of him, though.

He held his hat in both hands in front of him. He smiled slightly, then opened his mouth as if to speak, having apparently decided to address himself to Perkins. It was Perkins who spoke to him first.

"Dangerfield," he said, in such a tone of voice that the man, if he did not know Perkins, could have taken the word either as a statement or as a question. I looked up at Perkins, and was—to say the least—surprised. If Perkins knew Dangerfield, and he obviously did as he had mentioned his name spontaneously, and had thought that the third man in the office was he, he must recognise his error.

For the man neither looked like Dangerfield, nor was Dangerfield. And it was too improbable to imagine that there were two men named Dangerfield, and that Perkins should know them both, and assume I did as well.

"This is room 708?" asked the man, having ignored Perkins' utterance of the name Dangerfield. The number of the room was given in large, clear, black figures on the outside of the frosted glass door, so the man's question was curious. Surely he couldn't have thought that someone had—perhaps in the night—swopped the doors of the offices and rooms around, so that there would be confusion throughout the building?

"Yes, room 708," affirmed Perkins.

The man smiled.

"Then you must be Roberts," he said, looking me full in the face.

"Yes. Roberts," I replied. As I had not to my knowledge seen him before, let alone met him, how did he know my name? And how did he know that I would be in the room, room 708, at that time, or at any time? And more than that: how did he know that I'd be there when Perkins was? Pre-

sumably it was Perkins he wanted to see. Could he have had an appointment with Perkins?

"Of course you're Roberts," he said. "You needn't have *told* me. Did you think I didn't know?" He laughed quietly. "Well, gentlemen," he went on, walking over to the desk and placing his hat on its surface, on the blotter, "perhaps we may begin talking?"

"Talking?" I asked, looking at Perkins, hoping he'd reciprocate my surprise. He moved a couple of paces towards the window, so that he was standing in such a position that I could not encompass in my line of vision both Perkins and the other man. I could only look at one of them at a time. I was feeling so uneasy about the developing situation that I needed Perkins' guidance as to what to do, as to how to react and behave. Though not on paper senior to me in the organisation, I regarded him in practice as my superior. Was I being paranoiac in imagining that Perkins had moved his position so that I could not seek assistance in that direction?

The man looked at me closely, an expression of slight bewilderment furrowing his brow.

"Yes, talking. We're not here for *fun*, for our own amusement, are we?" he enquired.

"I . . . I was talking to Perkins here . . ." I turned my body a little so that I could see Perkins, so that he could see me. He was looking out of the window, gazing ahead of him across the road. If he was looking and not daydreaming or thinking of quite different matters, the sight that met his eyes must have been the office block opposite, and its windows.

"*Talking* to Perkins. Talking," the man said. "It's all talking. Everyone's always talking. That's what I said."

"But what about?" I asked, tentatively.

"What about? You ask what about? My dear friend . . . What do we normally talk about?"

The man was obviously suffering from a delusion. What was more disturbing was that Perkins, by his silence and lack of explanation, was almost conniving at it. I was intrigued to know both who the man was under the impression he was speaking to—who *his* Roberts was, as he was clearly (or not clearly) me—and what was the relationship between him and Perkins. If Perkins had known that the man was coming, why had he not informed me, or even briefed me as to what we were to discuss? The office we were occupying was room 708, but it was neither mine nor Perkins'. We had encountered one another quite fortuitously in the room about ten minutes

before the stranger (to me at least) had entered. Perkins and I had no prearranged agreement or understanding to meet in the office in which we had found ourselves. Indeed, our paths only rarely crossed. I had entered the room, looking for a colleague who I thought might be there.

"Roberts?" a voice had said. I had looked up, and had seen Perkins with his back to the window, in much the same position as he now occupied. I had only recognised him when he had turned his head into the room.

"How did you know it was me, Perkins?" I had asked.

"Oh, your footsteps, something about your presence."

"Do I give away so much without speaking?" I had continued, only half joking. Perkins then turned round from the window, and I had seen that he was wearing dark glasses, or dark lenses over his ordinary spectacles. As he peered at me inquisitively, he had said:

"I saw your reflection in the glass, in the window."

With his dark glasses on, I knew this to be most unlikely. And out of six hundred or more people in the building it was even more unlikely that he would immediately have identified me in this way—or any other individual.

"You've damaged your eyes?" I had said.

"Oh these?" he had replied, lifting up his right hand to his face, to remove the glasses. He folded them and slipped them into the outside breast pocket of his suit. "No, no. A little bit of eye strain. You have to take care of them, your eyes, particularly if you use them a lot, if you rely on them. You can't get replacements." He had laughed, apologetically.

"No, you're right there. You don't want to read too much. Particularly in bad light, or any kind of artificial light."

"Or look too much. We don't have to look as much as we think we do."

I hadn't known what to reply to that. The opposite had always seemed to me the truth: we often looked at people and things without really seeing them.

The subject had then been changed. I had enquired about a project which I knew Perkins was at the time engaged upon, and I was interested to know what progress was being made. The result of Perkins' project would almost definitely affect my next piece of research. It was when we were discussing this that the man whom Perkins thought to be Dangerfield had entered the room.

"Is this your office, Perkins?" the man asked.

Perkins looked away from the window, into the room, even at the man.

"I sometimes have cause to be here."

"I know that," continued the man. "You know I do. We've met here before now. The three of us."

Once more I looked at Perkins for reassurance, for some answer to the tissue of fabrication which the man was concocting. As if suspecting what I was thinking, Perkins resumed looking out of the window. Watching his face, I saw that he was looking down the front of the block opposite, as if trying to discover what was happening behind a window three or four storeys below us.

"Roberts, this must be your office, then," said the man in a neutral tone, not unlike that which Perkins had employed a couple of minutes previously, so that his remark was neither a statement nor a question.

"Oh no," I said. "You are mistaken. Room 708 is . . . not an office, in that sense. Not an office which any individual, even the president, considers to be his."

"I wonder what number that room is?" Perkins asked, pointing downwards, out of the window, towards the room he was looking at in the building opposite.

"It's not in this building," I said. Perkins turned his head to look at me. His eyes held mine for a few seconds, but he said nothing. He looked at me as if to convince me that I had said something exceptionally foolish, or certainly uncalled for.

The third man moved away from the desk at which he had been standing since he had placed his hat upon it, and walked towards the window.

"That room?" he said, jerking his head downwards in the direction of the window at which Perkins had been looking. "I was in that room twenty minutes ago."

"How interesting," I said, smiling, privately amazed at the coincidence. On the other hand, where was the man's proof? He was asking us, by implication, to take his statement on trust. Had Perkins not thought the man to be Dangerfield, I would have been more inclined to accept his remark. As it was, I wondered why he was so certain that he had been in that particular room when, from the window in room 708, it was difficult to see anything clearly in the window of the room three (or was it four?) storeys below in the building opposite.

As if aware of my scepticism, the man said:

"I know it was that room I was in, because from it I saw Perkins looking out of this window, looking down. The angle

from here to there is the same, in the opposite direction."

I was now even more bewildered as to what part Perkins was playing. If the man had observed him, *he* might well have observed the man. In which case the man would have had little difficulty in tracing room 708.

"The last time I was in this room, room 708 . . ." said the man, ". . . was with you Perkins, and with you Roberts."

"I'm afraid you're mistaken," I said.

"As I knew the room wasn't Perkins'—" he went on; at which point Perkins interrupted, as if annoyed for the first time, but still looking out of the window:

"Correct, correct," but the man ignored the interjection, and continued:

"Putting one and one together, I assumed it to be your room." He gave a little bow in my direction, which I thought courteous if unnecessary, in view of the nature of the conversation.

"My room is not on this floor," I explained.

"Ah, that clears up that then, doesn't it?" the man remarked, as if a problem of importance had been solved.

The telephone on the desk rang. I jumped, the ring being so shrill and unexpected, and the tension in the room (or in my body) so extreme. The man and I both looked at the instrument. After four or five rings, I said:

"Shall I?"

The man shook his head.

"Shall I?" he said.

"Might as well," said Perkins, not leaving his position at the window. "I'm not expecting a call. Roberts, are you?"

"No. Not here. They don't know I'm here."

"Might be for you," said Perkins, to the man he took to be, or wished for whatever reason to insist was, Dangerfield. But in that case why didn't he call him by his name—then or at any time? He had ceased to call him Dangerfield when the man didn't confirm that that was his name. The man had called Perkins by his name more than once, and Perkins hadn't confirmed his own name.

"Might be for you," the man said to Perkins, looking up from the telephone to the back at the window.

Sharply, Perkins said:

"I've said I'm not expecting a call."

The man picked up the receiver.

"Yes?" he said. Then, after a pause during which he listened to what was being said at the other end of the line:

"No. I'm sorry. Goodbye," and he replaced the receiver in the cradle. He said to me, as if in confidence:

"They didn't want me. Or you, or Perkins. An outside call. They'd come through to an extension. Should have gone direct to the switchboard."

I could have told him that without his having lifted the receiver. If it had been an inside call, from another room in the building, the switchboard would have rung through. The bell sounded in a different way.

He then said:

"Did you know that the building opposite, the one Perkins is looking at, is part of the operation?"

"This operation?" I asked. I knew it wasn't.

"Yes," he went on. "Not everyone knows. Not by any means."

Suddenly I remembered.

"Egerton!" I said triumphantly. The man looked up in surprise, as if not accepting the significance of my uttering his name. I was aware that Perkins had left the window and was a couple of paces behind me. It was so quiet in the room that I could hear his breathing. He said, into my ear:

"Dangerfield."

I had had enough of this duplicity, whatever the reason for it.

"You are Egerton?" I said to the man whom I remembered as being Egerton.

"Egerton?" he said.

"Dangerfield," said Perkins.

For some reason, presumably known to himself, perhaps known to Egerton, Perkins was pretending both to Egerton and myself that he, Egerton, was Dangerfield. If Dangerfield and Egerton had been in a room together, no one who knew them both could mistake them.

"This is an extraordinary coincidence," said Egerton.

"Coincidence?" said Perkins, walking about the office. "Confusion, you mean."

"No, no, my dear chap. Extraordinary coincidence. I replaced a man called Egerton. It is to him that I owe my present position, certainly my influence, such as it is."

"Replaced him?" I asked, understanding less and less. "Replaced yourself?"

"He left the organisation. Had to leave it."

"You . . . knew him?" I asked.

"No. He'd gone before I came. Rather unexpectedly, I believe. It wasn't for me to enquire. Knew nothing about him. I

was taken on at short notice, the shortest. I hadn't expected it. Hadn't anticipated it."

Perkins withdrew from an inside pocket a diary or notebook, and began leafing through it. Then I remembered something extraordinary, but what was incredible was that I should not have realised it the moment Egerton entered the room, or sooner, when I entered it and Perkins had addressed me. *Precisely the same actions and words between the three of us in a replica of this room had taken place during my sleep two or three nights previously.* Irritatingly, however hard I tried to recall the occasion, I couldn't be certain whether it was two nights ago, or three.

Having evidently found what he was looking for in his pocket-book, Perkins stabbed a finger at it and said, looking from Egerton to me, and back to Egerton:

"Next Thursday? Same time?"

Neither of us responded, but Perkins seemed to find our lack of response satisfactory, because he closed his diary and replaced it in his inside pocket. Then:

"See you next week, gentlemen." He smiled at us in turn, walked briskly through the room, through the outer office, and turned into the corridor.

"After you," said Egerton, gesturing to me to precede him. As he did so, with his other hand he swept up his homburg.

"Thank you," I said, and walked towards the corridor. When I reached it, I turned to the left. Egerton was two or three paces behind me, and I heard his feet turn to the right. I was keen to know where he was going, and whether Perkins was ahead of him or me. I looked up, down the corridor ahead of me, but I couldn't see him. However, there were a number of people moving down the corridor in both directions, and he could easily be ahead of me and obscured from view. But if Egerton was proceeding down the corridor in the same direction as Perkins, did the two of them have an arrangement to meet? Or did each of them really think that the business had been conducted satisfactorily?

At this moment I realised the discrepancy between what had been happening in room 708 (and was still happening, including my walking down this corridor, Egerton walking down it in the opposite direction, and uncertainty as to in which direction Perkins was proceeding) and what I had witnessed—and participated in—in my sleep.

Egerton had not been present. All his actions had been carried out by—and his remarks made by—Dangerfield.

COUNT D'UNADIX

MAREK OBTULOWICZ

What do you think he would say if he were told by someone that before he had been seeing mere foolish phantoms, while now he was nearer to being, and was turned to what in a higher degree is, and was looking at it more directly?

PLATO (*"The Republic"*—Book VII)

one,

Sometimes Giles slept late.

To wake. To glimpse Papa's broad back disappearing behind the door. Black clad shoulders fill the frame, rub smooth the ogee moulded jambs. To sit up, mouth agape, to see mother start towards him. Jump from her bed, from the amorphous heap of sheets and blankets. This morning gently snoring.

And warm against her breast. Safely out of the cot before the simplest gargle. Her fingers sliding under his plastic pants. She is whispering in his ear, stroking the downy hair on his neck. A kiss. And she carries her baby through the other door, to the bathroom for clean nappies.

Now on his back, close to the buzz of a fluorescent tube. Legs spread. The bottle in his hands. Milk, bland and tasteless.

The nipple collapses. Begins wheezing-in new air.

—But if I promise not to bite?—suggests Giles.

—Definitely no!—says mother. Shoving the rubber teat back between his lips.

Then in the kitchen. Aluminium and vinyl stools, a table.

Into the high-chair for cereal, cheese and father-noises (sounds like hefty books snapped shut). Thumpings pacing above the ceiling.

Where Papa rested. For a while stood very straight and very still. Climbing the spiral staircase always made him feel dizzy. He wanted to abandon the attic, the east-facing dormers, the limited daylight. Autumns of dull and sombre afternoons, of uneven oilwicks burning in the brass chandelier. And the antique Beidemeier furniture finished in mahogany to complement the grand-piano. But he marched on stiffly into his garret. He went directly to a cabinet in the far corner. He opened one of its glazed doors. He took out a flagon of mead, uncapped it with his teeth, and drank.

Mother drinks coffee. Smokes cigarettes. Giles is painting an amoeba with a spoon handle in the spilt lemon-juice on his tray. A shallow trough, chequered to match a synthetic surface of wall shelves. Black, orange squares, door knobs to eyelevel cupboards. Mother swallows a pill.

Breakfast is cheerful, but Giles can tell that something's bothering her. She seems anxious, uncertain. And now and again her nostrils twitch.

They return to the bedroom. A mother, her child, to struggle with a T-shirt that has shrunk. Apricot corduroy trousers that fit. The elastic not too tight? And offering his left foot for the right shoe, Giles explains, that though the Laws of Thermodynamics can only be mathematical approximations of what actually happens, they're quite acceptable. Pause, then:

—But . . . really everything is only an approximation.

—O—says the reassured mother. Young, dressing, pulling a sweater over her naked chest while her son leaps about on her unmade bed. Silences the covers.

She tucks in the bottoms of her jeans. Buttons her donkey-jacket, and with the tips of her fingers bunches up her silver hair. Cropped short. Like a man. She wears no make-up. Over the rounded lines of her face, freckled on either side of her delicate nose.

Muffled, Giles is strapped into a stroller. Mother fetches her pogo-stick. And together they set off for the supermarket.

At his window, Papa saw them go. Watched her first bounces and aimlessly gazed along the street. Flat roofs, semi-detached bungalows. The last of his mead drained, he smiled. At Giles. Thinking to wave. But moved away from the window for another flask. And then settled himself in an easychair, volume twelve of the Encyclopedia Britannica on his lap.

two, three,

Small stores along St Mary's Avenue, along the High Street. Construction work, an office block or perhaps the new shopping plaza in progress on the corner. A branch of Sainsbury Supermarkets next to the Post Office, two billboards from the junction. There's an advertisement for BP but no parking lot. Only the large plate-glass windows to front on a narrow pavement. Several doors marked "OUT"—one marked "IN", tended by a footman who limps, stands old and stooped over in his dark-blue uniform with braided epaulets, medals and lint. He hands out the wire baskets in which customers cast their purchases.

Giles sits outside in his push-chair. He is devising ways to motorise a pogo-stick. And:

—O my! What a *gorgeous* baby!

Giles peering into a powdered face, screwing up his nose at the smell of uncleaned dentures and politely looking away.

—Aaaah *such* a pretty boy!

Trapped. A curled finger dangerously near his chin. And wrinkles. And false locks across her forehead. And:

—There, there. How about an itty-bitty-teeny kiss for your fairy godmother?—fusses the artificial lady.

Giles tightening his grip on the pogo-stick.

—Get stuffed fella!—he shouts. At once checking on mother. But she's out of earshot; in the store; behind the teenage cashiers in their sheep-pen alleys; behind reflections of a street, blinking balecia-beacons, and where traffic drives in the wrong direction. The befuddled profile:

—Wait, just you wait you young you—the old woman begins, exasperated and indignant. She stops short, aware of a man in a business suit standing beside her, mailing a letter.

He eyes the woman suspiciously. He edges away, his umbrella raised. And he's staring at the sky for signs of rain.

—Now just you wait till I—

Again she breaks off. Giles smiling at her. He's dribbling:

—Gaggaa noo—he babbles.

Confused, the woman glances left, and right. Scans doorways for hooligans. For ventriloquists. Hearing only the rattle of a pneumatic drill. To construe; embarrassed and somewhat stupefied; to stalk off towards the building-site. Enlightened.

—Dumb bitch—thinks Giles.

And a small girl rounding the bend, rolling a hooplah along

the sidewalk. Whistling. Coming closer. Giles watches the wheel. Watches the girl pass.

—Hey!—he calls after her.

The girl stops. Looking back. Her wheel rolls on. Falls. She picks it up and skips over to the baby.

—Yeth?—she asks.

—What you doing?

—I'm going home.

—No with your mouth.

—My mowf?

—Yea make those lips again.

—What lipth?

—Like you had before, when you were making noises.

—Like thith—and she whistles.

—Yea!—cries Giles excited. Wriggling, listening to the girl puff through Baa Baa Blacksheep.

And a middle-aged woman, fat, in a shabby housecoat waddling out of the supermarket, mumbling about prices. A bulky parcel, carrier bags hang from her arms. She sees a small girl trying to teach a baby to whistle.

—E's too tiny to be playin wiv a pogo-stick—she's thinking, stepping onto the zebra-crossing. And a cement-mixer starts churning loudly. Then going into L & S Footwear, she imagines the baby say:

—That's tremendous! the manipulation to produce all those notes! up and down! higher and lower! Just by blowing. Why, it must take remarkable control.

—O yeth—the girl answers, puzzled. And whisking her plait over her shoulder walks away, homewards. Reciting Humpty Dumpty.

Giles wets his nappy.

—Hey!—he yells once more.

The girl comes back.

—How about taking me for a stroll around the block?

four, five,

Mrs Hewly peers at the dozen left slippers arranged about her feet. She doesn't like any of them. They don't really fit—a bit big? a little tight? The salesman sits quietly, patiently on

a stool alongside her. She's thinking—E ought to do somefin for is acne.

—It's no good young man—she says at last.—I've gotta av em in blue.

—I'm very sorry Madam, this is our entire stock and we unfortunately have nothing of that colour in your size. Perhaps you—

—No it's no good. I'll av to go elsewhere.

The boy is already gathering the slippers. Putting them into tissue-lined boxes. Mrs Hewly squeezes her foot into a gymshoe. Snarling her support-stockings. Worrying about her varicose veins. And scooping up her bags, she's mumbling:

—Ridiculous prices they're askin—only distinctly for everyone to overhear. She makes for the door.

Leaving L & S's to see her bus, a 207, turning into the High Street from The Broadway. At a sort of trot, but hardly faster than her walking pace, scurrying towards the stop. Swerves, avoiding a small girl hooplah-harnessed to a stroller, a baby in tow. Both whistling.

The bus standing. Waiting. Passengers getting off. Getting on. A long queue. But Mrs Hewly pushes in before an elderly couple. A business gentleman who's speculating about the weather, a woman (obviously wearing a wig) who's severely criticising "the ways and manners of our building trade employees".

—Some people got no idea—Mrs Hewly murmurs. She clambers aboard, her veins forgotten, and still muttering:

—Fancy powderin your face an then smearin harf that muck off wiv your glasses. Lawd an she's even got a tidal wave round er neck.

On the crowded bus Mrs Hewly has elbowed her way to a seat. Next to a schoolboy, catching his jacket, nipping his thigh. She fumbles for the fare. Loses a penny. And in the commotion the boy frees himself, shuffles closer to the window. Flicks through the pages of a book. While an umbrella fishes for the lost coin. Found, returned. Resettled, parcels on her knee, Mrs Hewly sighs deeply. She hears music. A familiar tune. She hums a few bars.

Why it's the Moonlight! And it's er Lloyd playin. E played so beautiful. Er Lloyd would av bin the great concert pianist. Da da dee dee dum. If only whatever ad befallen im adn't. Whatever they do to them. Whatever they call em. Gone for sure. La da da dee dum . . .

The conductor's ticket machine, the ratchet rhythm. The

Town Hall clock striking one. The bus lurching in her day-dream.

Just enough time to get Pat's lunch (the lazy good-for-nothin, e could put it in the oven isself) and catch a 97 over to Mrs D's place, nice woman that Mrs D. No cause to complain there. Nice to do a good job of er house. An what's the errand ere or there anyways, I say. She always pays before—and that Mrs D. Mind you, she needser usband. It aint right bringin up a babe all on your own. Specially a boy. It needser man's and. Not as I'd give much for a man. I might see the little blighta today. Bout time I seed im. Though then there could be somefin up. A reason why she keeps im out o sight . . .

As she gets off the bus, and ambles along the road, her bags and parcels growing heavier and heavier.

And home, to unpack, fix coffee and scramble a hotpot for her husband's meal. To be thinking of Lloyd again:

Praps Patrick would av bin a better name for im? is dad's name. Patrick Hewly, an the BBC Symphony Orchestra. No e might av bin enough like is ol man wivout the handle. Lawd! all them years an I never give it a thought. Lloyd? nice name that. Yea Lloyd. Corse it could av bin a girl. Jeezusmary a daughter! No. Eavens no!

—I can't sit ere all day thinkin bout what might av bin—she adds. A whisper.

On her way to the 97 stop she calls in at "The Hat" for a quick Guinness. She also looks in at the "Victoria" though only to shout:

—Patrick! yer dinner's in the oven. It wants comin out in harf hour!

Five minutes early, she goes through Mrs D's front gate. Rings the door-bell, but no one answers. She waits a while before ringing again. No answer. And she decides to try at the back of the house, past the toolshed, at the kitchen door.

—I do Mrs D's on Thursdays—she tells herself.—And today is Thursday, ain't it?

six,

A mother sits on a kitchen stool, a chair of orange polyvinyl. The coffee in a cup on the table is cold. She stares at the telephone hung on the wall. Wanting and not wanting it to ring.

Packed frozen lunches melt. Water is dripping through the paper shopping bag and onto the floor.

Her baby, smiling. With his throat slit, the blood streaming over his chin. Into his mouth. Pink on the new teeth. He's tied by his feet from a hook in the ceiling.

Windswept moors, undergrowth and dense woods. The men dragging the swamp have to call off the search because the light is failing. Tomorrow they start on the canal to find the boy. Caked in mud. Bloated. Dead.

A whining screech, burnt tyres. The weak, helpless cry:—*Mama!* Broken limbs, a mangled push-chair. Crowds. And ambulance sirens.

Ransom notes from cut-out newsprint pasted to brown paper. Kidnappers who want to show him on the stage, make him into a freak. Sobbed, hysterical phone conversations, the child held at gun-point. The reverberating crash of a bullet piercing his skull. And the back door opening.

—Why! Mrs D. I didn't think anybody was at ome. I rang, twice, but you didn't answer. Anyfin the matter?

—He's not here Mrs Hewly. He's gone.

—Not ere? Who's not ere?

—Giles, Mrs Hewly, he's gone. They've taken him, I know, he's been hit by a bus, I just know.

—Now Mrs D, what d'you mean? I don't—

—And it's all my fault. I left him outside minding my stick just as always. When I finished shopping, he was gone. They've taken him. They'll do him harm for sure!

—Now just a minute Mrs D. Who's taken im? Av you contacted the police?

—Yes of course, but what can they do? O I'm sorry! I suppose I'm being rather melodramatic.

—Well I wouldn't know about that, but they'll find im, don't you fret—Mrs Hewly is saying, yet thinking:

Whatever can be the matter wiv that child? All the time I've bin workin for er, never once av I seen that kid. Gone. That's rich.

And:

—Ere let me fix you a cup o tea. It'll do you good an eavens all your groceries aven't bin put away yet. All this food, it'll get ruined. Now you relax an don't worry none. Let me do everyfin. Soon as you're settled wiv a nice cup o tea I'll start on them livin-room curtains like I promised. Eavens Mrs D! d'you know what they're chargin for slippers these days . . . ?

seven, eight, nine,

—This is where I live—says Giles.

—It'th nithe—the girl replies.

—Would you push me into the garden? I can wait for mother there.

—Yeth—and she goes through the wrought iron gate pulling the stroller after her.

—I live that way—she says, and points beyond the maisonettes on the other side of the street.

—Well I'll see you again. Soon?

—Yeth.

—Thanks for bringing me home . . . well . . . O, by the way were you breast fed?

—What?

—It doesn't matter, bye.

—Bye.

The girl hooks the hoop over her shoulder and skips along the road. Once, twice she glances back to where her friend's head appears above the hedge, and she waves. But Giles doesn't see her. He's studying the uneven cracks in the path (wondering what could be keeping mother? if only she would hurry back, and change his nappy). He's looking towards the front door. Towards the toolshed.

Where Papa uncorked a fourth bottle of mead, took a shot and gaped at his book. No longer could he locate the words. Rows of undulating lines. His written corrections and additions merged with the text. Jumbled, unstimulated thoughts of Kepler, the Laws of Planetary Motion and . . . why on earth had anyone brought a piano in here . . . ?

He put the book on the floor, slid off the armchair to sit cross-legged in front of it, but losing his balance thrust out his hand. Fingers spread, supporting, like the ribs of a fan-vault, pressed against an open page. And he fell asleep.

It's getting late.

Giles fidgets, dampened. Dispirited.

Mrs Hewly has fussed. One pot of tea, then another and another. She has surely done her best to comfort poor Mrs D, and since there hasn't been a sound anywhere in the house, is obliged to believe the kidnapping story.

Corse the babe could be dumb—she's thinking. As she's rinsing cups and saucers, congratulates herself anew for having persuaded Mrs D to lie down. To take a TV dinner with her.

And the man in the toolshed woke. Levering himself up on one arm, getting to his feet. Tall, erect. Surveying his reflection amongst bottles in a cabinet. Above an applause, silent. Smoothing down his hair, a grey wisp to tuck behind his ear. And he selected a decanter of claret. This he put on the table. Next to that a cut-glass goblet, a coat of arms embossed in the crystal. From a drawer, he took a crisp linen napkin and silver cutlery—including a fork-knife, his own design, commissioned in Paris. He set one place at the table. Peeling the foil wrapping off the compartmented trough, to spoon the contents onto the Delft porcelain.

He ate slowly, chewing well and taking frequent but short sips from the glass. Every so often, he checked his lips with the napkin, neither soiling nor creasing it. He sat upright, as though the finely carved chair-back was no more than an objet d'art.

The meal over, he leaned back, and drained one last glass of wine. He decided not to smoke a cigar, but picking up his mead—one long long draught—walked across to the piano. He scanned the score. Sitting, played several bars of bass. To hear the ovation again, to pound a right limb, the prosthetic one, hard down on the keyboard.

& ten.

It's almost dark. Mrs Hewly waddles to the living-room (to get at them curtains) and in the garden makes out the silhouette of a baby slumped in a push-chair.

—Mrs D!—she yells—is that im! O Mrs D is that im?

Mrs D is running. To the room. Sees Giles through the window and rushes into the garden.

—Giles! Giles!—she's calling.—Giles where have you been?

—Waiting, and waiting.

The mother hugs her baby. Tightly. Again. She is tilting her head. Looking at him. His eyes. Touches his hair, his ears. And hugs the child again. Then, angered, she accuses:

—You've been talking haven't you. Well? talking to strangers, and I've told you before. And you promised. I want to know what happened. Where were you?

Giles is whistling, softly. He's seen mother lose her temper before.

—What're you doing?—she shouts.

—Whistling—says Giles, calm as ever.

—Don't it's—

And mother begins laughing. At his naive, innocent expression. Hugs her son once more. Her eyes water. She sniffs. To hold back the tears, to hide from answering:

—Why are you crying mother?

—I'm not.

Mrs Hewly, wearing her hat and coat, appears on the doorstep.

—I must be gettin on ome—she says. Coming up to Mrs D.

—My Patrick'll be screamin for somefin to eat soon . . . so this is young Giles eh? Them curtains'll av to keep till next week. Hello Giles. The-erre!

Giles seems ready to reply, but instead dribbles.

—Din I see you on the Igh Street wiv a little girl? Yea, she was teachin you to whistle, I remember.

—O really Mrs Hewly! He couldn't whistle, he's not even two years old, not even properly speaking.

—Peakeene, peakeene—echoes Giles.

—Well yea? O corse—agrees Mrs Hewley.—E's only a mite. Well . . . must be orf then. Seeyer Thursday. Tata, TA-TA Giles.

—Giles, say bye-bye to Mrs Hewly.

—Bye. Bye.

—Aaah e's cute Mrs D—as she shuts the gate. And winks. Ambles off, muttering to herself:

—I'm gonna get somefin special in, real special for Lloyd's supper tonight.

—So what's this about a girl?—asks mother.—And where's my pogo-stick?

—She taught me to whistle—says Giles.—Listen!

Baa Baa Blacksheep.

—That's very nice—says mother.—But you should—

Giles is now whistling Baa Baa Blacksheep backwards.

He finishes:

—Then, after, she took me for a ride and brought me home. I'm to see her again. She told me about her mummy. She's got a daddy too and—

—All right Giles, enough. Let's have you inside. You can tell me all about it later, when you've had some food. I've still to get you to bed and myself organised and . . .

Content, fed, Giles feigns sleep.

A proud mother leans over his cot. Thoughts clear of words, a joyous admiration. Bending to kiss him lightly on the fore-

head, to adjust the blankets, and be certain that the tablelamp isn't shining in his face.

Secure, Giles senses her nearness, his eyes closed. In her love, the image of a smile.

She's turning towards the door. The usual qualms—her child alone while she works part-time for the mini-cab company. Though there's a spare key with the neighbours—just in case.

As she puts on her coat (it occurs to her that she might remarry) she misses the pogo-stick.

Giles listens. The front door slams. He opens his eyes.

Papa also hears the footsteps. Further and further away. He starts down the stairwell.

And Giles standing in his cot, his fingers squeezed round the railings. Apprehensive.

—Papa!— he cries. The door inching ajar. —Papa! Papa will you explain? Something's wrong, I'm having problems with . . . I don't . . . can't . . .

—Nothing's wrong Giles— he hesitates; and —there is nothing *wrong*, but please . . . no discussion tonight, OK?

—What then? Last night—

—Tonight Giles, we'll play.

—Cumeene! Cumeene!—he calls, arms in the air to be lifted from the cot.

The man carries the baby to the bed. And drops him so that he bounces on his back.

Giggings, yelpings. A shout:

—Ere dey cum, ere dey cum!

Papa beside him. Giles crawling onto his chest:

—Gotcha! Gotcha!—barely aware of the strong alcoholic tang to the adult's breath.

Now Papa rolling onto his side, a hand on the boy's stomach, asking:

—Who's got who? Who's got whom?

—Gotcha! gotcha!—wriggling, kicking. Free.

And clambering onto Papa's shoulders, Giles on his feet, a large thumb for each hand. Falling. Laughing and squealing. Climbing again. Jumping and bouncing. Seated on his knee to slip through. *Boomp!* and *cumeene cumeene!* Somersaults, tossed. Spun round and round, round. Fighting. Chuckling. Hitting his head against the wall. He's crying. And needs to be consoled.

Then again and again. Relentlessly tickled. But:

—More cratch, more cratch!—the child calls, arms level, elbows bent, fingers in armpits.—More cratch, more cratch!

Again. Again.

And Papa is exhausted.

—It's time you were back in bed—he wheezes.

—No. More cratch! More cratch!

—No, no more scratch Giles.

—Hand!—demands Giles. —Hand!—grabbing at the man's fingers, once again stepping onto his chest.

—No Giles. We've to stop. I'm tired. Perhaps . . . ? Earlier you asked whether anything was wrong . . . well . . . you don't need me, that's what it is, you know that. It's not wrong. So will you try letting me go?

—Where gone Gile, where Gile?—cries the boy, his tiny hands covering his eyes.

—Where? where? There, there he is. I can see you. But Giles, hide and seek is different, and complicated.

A small child peering into an adult's eyes, feeling for what he doesn't understand. Noises. And turning away searching for something to attract his attention. Flowers in a vase.

—Fliers?—he suggests.

The man does not hear.

—Giles I know you've tried before. The whistling's upset you, because you'd forgotten. Forgotten what it was and how to do it. Everything will be like that. From now on you'll be learning. But tonight release me. Yourself, oh it's so irregular, and becoming very confusing.

And he stretches his right hand, fingers which are uncommonly stiff. Taut.

A lull. The boy is silent. Melodic, the string of sounds. Passing. Puzzling. A fear that he's bad. Those words all have meanings.

—You see Giles I'm wanted elsewhere. Even when you chose me, you knew that one day I'd have to go. How can I say it . . . ? Men are fathers. Sons too.

Lips that quiver.

Giles has a piece of paper. He's tearing off short strips, stuffing them into his mouth.

—More cratch! More cratch!—he murmurs, but with no enthusiasm.

—Giles I have to go. I'm leaving tonight. So this time, please Giles.

And the man carries the baby back to the cot.

—Up! Up!

But the man has gone.

Under crumpled sheets, Giles falls asleep. Sleeps. To stir uneasily. In a dream. To hear a whistling. Aab Aab Peeshckalb. Startled, he wakes. A baby has no bladder control at that age.

—Amaaa!—he's shrieking. —Aammaaaaagh!

BEHIND THE WALLS

LAURA TOKUNAGA

Silence: tangerines, and the first faint whisper of stars. Light blossomed slowly here and there like dandelions suddenly puffed into incandescence. Mrs. Entbrot sniffed and, catching a lingering hint of cloves and cinnamon, smiled. Somehow it seemed so appropriate.

Martin had always preferred his Andalucian stickleback roasted with just the right touches of citron and cloves and the cinnamon, well, the cinnamon was the sort of touch one would expect from Haber and Haber's Happy Wanderer Harbor&Home. The fee was, quite honestly, exorbitant—but Mrs. Entbrot liked to think that one got what one paid for. She sighed and blotted an indiscreet tear at the corner of her eye. Martin was gone, but Haber and Haber had provided expert consolation in the manner for which they were so justly known. Mrs. Entbrot was once again grateful for the large steps science had taken; for science *had* taken them, and always, she parroted silently, always steps taken with humanity in mind.

Her "Sylvan Paradise" window screen darkened and the comforting vista of trees, sky and water was replaced with random configurations of light and sound. A tasteless, odorless, colorless gas dispersed itself unobtrusively through the slightly porous walls. Mrs. Entbrot straightened herself with a touch of alertness.

"And now," piped a pleasantly cheerful voice, "it's Haber and Haber musical roulette time." The voice dropped to a more confidential register. "You do remember, Mrs. Entbrot, that Haber and Haber musical roulette was the game you chose out of all the others with which to pass your time while here at your Happy Wanderer Harbor&Home?" Mrs. Entbrot nodded

conspiratorially. "Of course you do," continued the voice, "and so, every day you are allowed an afternoon or so of your favorite pastime—Haber and Haber musical roulette. You will be given five minutes to prepare yourself—and then—at the sound of three beeps, please begin. Have a pleasant time."

Mrs. Entbrot leaned back and breathed deeply, trying to relax and prepare herself as the voice had instructed. Veils of phosphorescent color smoked across the floor. Far above her, half hidden in vague mistiness, she was sure there were stars. And a moon or two perhaps.

The buzzer sounded its warning.

Mrs. Entbrot reached into the top drawer of her dresser and withdrew the crystal cube with its snake-heap of crimson threads. She carefully inserted her hands and decided vaguely on the movements of the contrapuntal major fourteenth.

"Begin . . ." sighed a voice. From somewhere.

Mrs. Entbrot began. The actions were almost automatic.

Although her fingers continued their practiced and majestic march, Mrs. Entbrot was a little distracted. Had that been a hiss she'd heard from beyond the low dark line of insubstantial hills? Or chime perhaps? A line of sickly green and fuschia creased her forehead.

Where had Stork and Bunnybox been keeping themselves these past few days? They were both her friends, she was certain of that, and with Martin gone they were really the only ones she could depend on.

She cocked her head at the distant suggestion of a silver bell. No, she'd been mistaken.

Mrs. Entbrot leaned back in her peacock-feathered imperial rattan chairbed and the line of scintillant colors disappeared from her face. She returned her attention to the adroit manipulation of her hands and the various pieces of elusive crimson thread within the confines of the crystal cube. She found herself thinking once again of Martin. Yes, Martin was gone, but she had to admit that the Haber and Haber "Martin" Multi-Media Tape was quite good. In ways, almost better than Martin himself. She had added the tape to her ever-expanding collection of Haber and Haber products. A little later in the day (or was it night?)—no matter, she would select another spool for sensing and really enjoy herself if only Stork . . . There was a moment of violent discord within the crystal cube. Shaken and alarmed, Mrs. Entbrot compressed her lips into the semblance

of a grim line and focused her perennially scattered wits on the play of line, light and color in the crystal cube. It wouldn't do to allow one's attention to wander too far . . .

"There goes another one in 231B-1001," said young Dr. Dawes Daniels, carefully blotting the sweat beaded on his forehead with an antiseptic scented napkin.

"Woops, okay," grunted his assistant, and in a singularly ungraceful lurching movement, swooped over the blinking beeping section of his wall-high control board and pushed the button marked "terminus" in the 231B-1001 square.

"Progress of sorts, I suppose," he remarked dryly to the gently dabbing Dr. Daniels, who only nodded hurriedly and pressed out "R20-567-0890 ready 231B-1001" on his table-length order screen.

"We here at Haber and Haber *really* know how to—"

"Shut up!" grated Daniels shortly, dropping his napkin down the chute marked WASTE. "467Z-0982's going out too if you'd just keep your goddamned mind on the job, Bailey."

Bailey shrugged his round shoulders and careless rapped the terminus button in the 467Z-0982 square.

Daniels tapped out his telegraphic message on the order screen and sat silently, feeling the anger and bewilderment twisting into a cold boil at the pit of his stomach.

Outside, a garish orange sun beat down on the blank white walls of the monolithic building and cheerfully bright lettering that spelled out "Welcome to Haber and Haber's Happy Wanderer Harbor&Home."

At the sound of the buzzer Mrs. Entbrot carefully withdrew her hands from the crystal cube, first making certain that the crimson threads lay in positions of relative harmony, untangled and ready to be picked up again with only a moment's notice. The light in the cube was out. As the tray of saffron rice, spiced meats and vegetables appeared before her, she wondered absently what had become of Stork and Bunnybox and what they might be up to. They were such unpredictable creatures.

She performed vacant shovelling motions with her hands as the tray of food shimmered slightly before her. With a small smile of satiation, she dabbed at her mouth with the edge of the bedsheet and lay her hands down at her sides once more.

The buzzer gave three warning bursts of sound and Mrs.

Entbrot shakily inserted her hands in the crystal cube, fingers poised to pick up the threads. "Stork, dear. Bunnybox. Oh, where are you?" she exclaimed pettishly as a light snapped on in the cube. She began to perform the much-practiced harmonic minor nineteenth, breathing slightly hard.

Outside the room, Male Nurse Ae2 turned away from the peephole with a slight shake of the head. "Any day now," he muttered pityingly, "she'll go any day now."

The images of the pattern-painted feather dancers faded from the screen and were replaced by fountains of writhing luminescent colors.

"We at Haber and Haber *really* know how to take care of your old folks," pronounced a round, well-oiled voice.

"For only 10,000 moncreds, your old folk can spend hours of fun-filled fantasy materialization time at one of Haber and Haber's beautiful Happy Wanderer Harbor&Homes. And—" the voice paused expectantly, "10,000 moncreds covers the entire stay of your old folk, be it seven days or seventy years—room, equipment, and intravenous nutrition included, not to mention unlimited use of all fine Haber and Haber products."

Specks of fire flitted through the mists of coiling color.

"So remember," insisted the voice fatuously, "keep your old folk happy at Haber and Haber, not neglected and miserable at home—and thank you for thinking Haber and Haber."

The colors faded and gleaming bodies and feathers exploded onto the screen.

Mrs. Entbrot was sweating copiously. The harmonic minor nineteenth was more difficult than she'd remembered. However, once initiated, she had no choice but to continue. And she had to be very careful; they allowed no mistakes here at Haber and Haber. They were polite and kind, a turquoise wind sang mournfully past her ear, but they allowed no mistakes. And where were Stork and Bunnybox? Had they been avoiding her lately? She jerked her head in annoyance, not noticing or caring that the movement jarred one of the threads into a position of subtle dissonance. Her fingers continued obliviously.

There was a slight dull echo behind the wavering line of dark hills. Mrs. Entbrot attempted to glance sidewise out of the corner of her eye. "Bunnybox?" she called plaintively. Her thumbs and index fingers missed a movement, contrasting

unpleasantly with the dropped thread. The furrow of colors began to crease her face.

Suddenly there was a wash of rainbows up and down the walls of the room. Tiny moons appeared and began to dance in and out from behind delicately lavender clouds. "Stork!" cried Mrs. Entbrot in rapture, forgetting her hands and the crystal cube.

"Story-york-york/Whrang ding-dong/Stork!"

A slight odor of tangerines and cinnamon wrapped itself around the echoes.

"Martin?" whispered Mrs. Entbrot, suddenly aware of the wetness of her eyes, "Martin?" Her hands lay still in the cube.

"545E-9030's going out," noticed Dr. Daniels.

"So it is," commented Bailey, and pressed the button marked terminus.

Mrs. Entbrot screamed as a brilliant white halo surrounded her body, her limbs stiff and flailing. Smoke rose from her head.

"U13-689-4532 ready 545E-9030," typed Dr. Daniels.

They wheeled the body out on a nice clean robostretcher and dropped it into the bins with the rest of the garbage.

AMONG OTHER THINGS

ROBERT MEADLEY

"And faster the pulses of rich pain burn in your vagina, burst in the supple recesses of your spine, writhe on the surfaces of your skull. Your arse constricts, your back arches, your heart stops . . ."

Pause.

On the bed the tall hunchback disengaged himself from the girl's body, untaped the leads from his cropped head, and swung his legs to the floor. Breathing shakily he walked to the adjacent bathroom.

Water swirled in the basin with a soft mumbling sound. Beyond the window, in the space formed by the blotched arc of the river and black bar of the derelict railway viaduct, large pieces of the city's telephone exchange hung in the air above a spreading dustcloud. No noise penetrated the double glazing. Carefully drying his testicles Chalice watched the falling walls raise small eruptions in the dust. There seemed to be no wind. He rubbed his pubic hair briskly and turned back to the bedroom.

The dead girl still lay on the bed; her raised knees splayed, orange and blue leads running from her tangled hair to Baird's infernal box. Dropping the towel on the floor, Chalice passed on to the landing, closing the door quietly behind him.

Still naked he stood at the head of the stairs looking down into the hall. Among the marble pillars a long man sprawled in a cane chair, in ragged denims and matted fur jacket but patent turquoise boots and gleaming hair. He wore a necklace of wolf's teeth and porcupine quills across his hairless chest and heavy earphones in slate blue plastic and bright chrome. His eyes were closed.

Halfway down the stairs, one hand on the mahogany rail, Chalice heard voices from the conservatory. Two boys, aged

four and six, were shouting "Blinking Blenkinsop, ha ha, blinking Blenkinsop", and laughing to each other. Something they'd picked up from television, Chalice supposed. He wondered why they weren't at school. Perhaps they were on holiday.

Nothing important had arrived by the afternoon post. Chalice turned from the hall table to the long man in the cane chair. His eyes had opened and he pushed the blue headset back from one ear.

"Baird given you your cheque yet, Lem?"

Lem nodded lazily, reaching under his hair to worry his free ear.

"Any idea where Baird is now?"

Lem shook his head, tugging at the fine gold ring in his long lobe.

"You're very lively today, Lem."

Lem looked directly at Chalice for the first time, blankly. Chalice crossed to the library.

"Technically, Fritz, it's perfect."

Chalice pushed his hands into the sleeves of his robe. Baird waited eagerly, perched on the desk, his hands arrested in an absurd wringing gesture.

"It was all you required it should be?"

Chalice spread a tight smile.

"All I thought I might want it to be, yes."

Baird looked puzzled, half hurt.

"Definitely a powerful experience."

Chalice's smile turned down at the left apologetically. Baird didn't seem reassured.

Under a velvet brown sky Lem sauntered home, his dilated eyes fixed on the showering stars and streetlights as his vision flickered through innumerable retinal adjustments. A mottled green-gold cigar drooped from his teeth. He wore his headphones slung loose round his neck and his heels echoed in the deserted streets, their pace slowing almost imperceptibly in the silence.

"Awurrgh."

Lem stopped, then wondered why and felt for matches to relight his cigar in case that was it. A ragged tangle of limbs in the shop doorway writhed, a scrawny hand reaching out to touch Lem's arm.

"Dry night tonight, Lem."

Lem peered.

"Ah, Weldon."

He reached into his denims for money, found only Chalice's cheque and pulled that out. Weldon's hand took it.

The carriage gates still just hung on their pillars. Up the overgrown drive one of the double front doors stood open, fanning light into the trees. Among the battling grape and ivy vines that overran the hall, head propped against the wall, Max Krill lay snoring on the floor. By his right hand an electronics manual, by his left a brandy bottle and a fat ashtray. His beard rested on his matted chest, whose hair coiled down over his stomach to mingle with the black mane of his sister, sleeping with her head on his lap.

Lem paused in the doorway, felt for the headphones hanging at his neck and loosed a little music to revive himself. Krill opened his eyes and rolled bloodshot irises.

"Weldon's around again," Lem said. "Just met him."

Krill groaned, managing a note of sympathy of sorts, and felt for the brandy.

"Something ought to be done about him," Lem added.

Krill nodded and drank, offered Lem the bottle. Lem shook his head and wandered off upstairs.

She really was very beautiful in her sleek way, Chalice thought, watching his wife wipe cleansing cream from her throat with a pale tissue. The long titian hair she had just brushed gleamed against her white back. Not what he'd intended to remarry for, though; he had wanted a new mother for his boys.

She got up from the mirror and slid into bed beside him. He ran his hand over her stomach; she felt smooth and well-fed. He bent and kissed her neck, his hand reaching round over her pelvis. There was no response, he expected none. Her listlessness excited him. Her breathing, he knew, would hardly alter. There was no point in arousing her. He smiled as he coaxed her thighs apart and patted the inside of her leg, thinking inconsequentially of his sons.

That afternoon Chalice's step had been light as he entered the house and flicked through the late mail. He was slightly drunk. He lit a cigarette, loosened his tie, and loped upstairs. At the bedroom door he paused.

Her head thrown back, her eyes closed, Penelope sat naked on the bed, kneading the inside of her thighs with strong fingers. She breathed noisily and moaned from the throat. Baird sat watching her from a chair. Orange and blue leads from their heads joined in Baird's black box.

Chalice had stepped back quietly and slipped downstairs to the library, intrigued.

The mad Sylvester Lumm, who commanded the destinies of so many, stood at his window staring out over the thrashing sea towards Mull. He was alone and bored. He had just wondered whether to commit suicide but thought not. He sipped cold tea from a plain pint mug. On a pad among the telephones were scrawled brief notes:

Baird peddling box as own, eh?

Lem fine, but more Bach!!!

Pete's Sat 7.

A single fulmar circled over the grey sea. Lumm could not see it: his sight was going for the third time and he was trying not to mind.

Lem lay on his back beside the lemon tinted pool, smiling feebly. It was hot. He pulled off his earphones and half sat up, propped on his elbow.

"What's your name again?"

Krill's sister looked up from his navel and smiled.

"Miriam."

Lem readjusted his headset.

"Nice name," he said.

Mick, another thin man, posed between the french doors and stared moodily across the grass with huge dark eyes. The cuff of his right sleeve was turned back, the left buttoned. He tapped his temple. Lem pulled off his earphones again.

"Mellor's here."

"I'm not in."

Lem rolled backwards into the water and stroked lazily towards the island.

Heaped conveyor belts of urban refuse wound upwards through complexes of hoppers, screens and chargers to the darkened heights of the immense cavern. Ranks of crimson and silver Pakamatic wagons with the city crest on their cabs were parked under arc lights against the near wall. Clouds of dust coughed up through traps from the tip beneath the bolted plate-iron floor and coiled slowly about men's knees in the still air. In the shadows of far recesses furnace mouths glimmered.

The noise was intolerable. Lem's eyes glowed, his headphones were slung over his shoulder. Mellor sat down astride

the arm of half a sofa and rubbed oil across his face with the back of his glove.

"How's it going?" Lem asked.

"We keep it moving."

Respirators muffled their voices. Mellor pulled his glove off and rubbed his face again, then pushed the respirator under his chin and smeared the sweat on his upper lip. Pressing each nostril in turn he blew out fistfuls of black mucus, snorted generally and rubbed his upper lip again. Lem had been looking round. Now he tapped the gun case under his arm.

"Anywhere I can put this?"

"In the office."

They picked their way round a tangle of tarnished brass rods piled like spillikins to the box with windows that stood on old bricks on the iron floor. Inside Mellor wiped the dust from two stools, then plugged the kettle in. Lem perched on a stool and bent to put the gun case, that had already acquired a dull film of dust, by the open door. Mellor shovelled tea and sugar into two mugs.

"We should be finished in half an hour. Trade day today, that's why it's taking so long."

Lem nodded. His face was flushed with the intensity of the noise.

"What sort of sport do you get these days?"

"Got one, ooh, this long? the other day."

Mellor held his hands two or three feet apart to indicate the size of the dead rat.

Chalice slumped awkwardly in his huge chair, his twisted shoulder thrust forward. He sighed through his nose several times. A half-empty Bacardi bottle stood by his ankle. Shards of glass gleamed in his bloody palm.

Upstairs a woman waited: middle-aged, well-preserved, indifferent to Baird's box. If he wanted to he could watch her on closed-circuit. She would be sitting by the bed, neatly dressed, smoking a cigarette and flicking through an old copy of Vogue. He remembered something Lem had once mentioned having read somewhere about middle-aged women burning best, but he forgot the details.

The pure angst of the lapsed decadent yawned. From the garden he could hear his two sons playing football around the sundial. Grimly, like a man staking his life at solitaire, he went out to join them,

Rain lashed the meagre crowd straggled along the dual carriage way that divided the council estate from the garden suburb. From the twelfth floor of a block on the slope above the road Lem and Mick stood watching the approaching procession.

A blue-green police car moved slowly down the road, the heavy rain dancing on its roof. After this came Baird in outsize opera clothes, riding a brown donkey. He carried a large sign on a pole, which read: SYLVESTER LUMM IS COMING TO YOUR TOWN. His knees pumped the ass's flanks constantly to keep it moving. Rain streamed from the brim of his top hat.

Finally, fifty yards or so behind, came Sylvester on an elephant. He held a large umbrella which he twirled coyly from time to time. Rats'-tails of white hair whipped about his enormous skull. He waved and beamed benediction on his few spectators. From each side of his howdah hung huge banners, tips trailing on the rain-dazzled road, inscribed plainly: I AM RICH.

That was all.

As the small cortège passed the crowd faded away behind it. Lem turned to Mick, leering.

"He never changes."

Mick nodded, looking serious.

"I sometimes think he's infinite."

"Which was your friend?"

Mrs Davies, Gwen, turned from the window at last. A heavy silver charm bracelet chinked on her slim bare arm.

"Ah!" said Lem and Mick simultaneously, hugging each other and laughing.

"The big one."

Sunlight filtered through the trees roofing the narrow road, speckling Lem's drained face two shades of primrose grey. He lay half out of the car twisted in the ditch, its bonnet buckled against the roots of a huge oak. Somewhere nearby a tractor snarled up and down a field; its coarse purr permeated through half a dozen hedges. Lem opened one eye and blinked vacantly at the trees above him. The tractor persisted. Lem opened both eyes, closed them, and felt with one weak hand for the headphones askew about his ears. They were broken, which didn't make him feel any better.

The tractor came nearer. Lem raised his head shakily and squinted at the inside of the car. From the passenger seat

Miriam had crumpled forward under the dashboard, her head lolling against the gearstick. She was breathing. Lem eased his legs out of the car and began crawling out of the ditch.

The tractor began to move away. Lem hauled himself upright against the oak and peered around him. On the hillside beyond the fringe of trees he saw a high stone wall ending in a cluster of cedars through which windows glinted. Taking a stave of dead wood for a crutch he started hobbling up the slope. The slope was concave and seemed to take longer than it actually did. He stumbled several times. The tractor had gone but a small plane passed low overhead and circled slowly.

At the wall Lem could hear the soft clip of pruning shears and the flap of sandalled feet from the other side. He discarded the stave. Feeding on fragmentary memories of raucous noise he jumped for the wall's top, caught it, and dangled there weakening. Over the coping he could see an orchard, half an acre or more of flowering apple trees. His vision blurred. He pulled himself on to the wall's broad rim and lost consciousness. His arm slipped; he lost balance, rolled, and fell through tearing branches to soft turf, showering apple blossom.

Two surprised monks stood over his spreadeagled body.

"Where once the suburb of Alwoodley spread its dwarvish houses and monstrous golf course," Sylvester waved an arm to indicate the surrounding countryside. Now there was only thin new grass and the curious structure of Sylvester's folly surrounded by cindery mud. Sylvester stood by his car, admiring his folly. An oval oak platform stood supported by a spiral of grotesque pillars, a delicate flying staircase curved up to the front, a squat turret of black stone rose at one end.

Mick climbed from the driving seat of the car and came to stand by Sylvester. There was a small spot of blood on his buttoned left sleeve. Sylvester brushed ineffectually at strands of hair that kept blowing in his eyes. He was frowning.

"It will look better when the platform's gone, of course."

"What's going to happen to the platform?"

"It will disappear, among other things."

"Oh. Can you get up the tower?"

"Of course. From the bottom and from the platform. Posterity must rise."

They mounted the sweeping stone stairs to the platform. Mick rubbed his palm along the polished oak balustrade.

"This isn't meant to last either?"

"No, no."

"Did you design this thing yourself?"

"Of course."

"I thought there was something unhealthy about it."

Fat candles wavered in ancient draughts in the priory's dim chapel. Black cowed monks filled the bleak, rush-strewn nave. They had laid Lem on a tressle bier before the altar, his hands crossed on the linen shroud and closed round a silver crucifix.

"Tremens factus sum ego, et timeo, dum discussio venerit, atque ventura ira."

"Quando coeli . . ."

"Dies illa, dies ira, calamitatis et miseriae: dies magna et amara valda."

"Dum veneris . . ."

In the intensity of the chant Lem stirred. His bony foot thrust through the antique linen. His eyes opened, gazing upwards at the sunlit east window. A radiant madonna in hip-swung blue stepped towards him, smiling. He flexed his narrow chest and broke out his arms, shaking free the innumerable neat folds of his shroud.

"Resurrexi et adhuc tecum sum," started a lone and eager voice in the nave.

"Alleluia," other monks caught up raggedly at the chorus.

"Posuisti super me manum tuum."

"Alleluia."

Lem struggled to his feet and stood tottering on his bier, his tattered shroud flowing about him in the rising sound. The blonde vision above him still smiled.

"Here I come . . ."

He leapt wildly. The monks, dazzled by too many mysteries, fell silent. Lem lost velocity in mid-flight and fell, crashing and cursing across the altar. Bible, crucifix and basilica scattered in a babel of metallic discords.

"It was a silent order," Lem explained, but the girl looked no wiser. She watched him dutifully but blankly. He swung the car off the road on to the cinder track. The car headlights splashed brief rainbows in the spray as an on-coming car crossed the ford.

Sylvester's folly was in flames. Oiled faggots stacked among the grotesque pillars blazed furiously, the fire bulging periodically as cans of petrol cached inside exploded with the heat. On the glowing platform Sylvester capered back and forth, carry-

ing more petrol from the turret and hurling it down the flaming staircase to repel well-wishers.

Lem jarred his car to a halt, spraying mud over other cars and members of the crowd. He jumped out, leaving the girl babbling her confusion, and ran to the foot of the stairs. Rivulets of burning petrol guttered at his feet. A policeman caught him lightly by the arm.

Sylvester saw Lem and waved. He looked as if he was laughing, but he might have been shouting. The sound of the fire drowned any noise he made. Lem looked round for Mick.

"How can anyone get up there?"

"Steps in the tower from a door at the bottom, if you can get to it."

"I'll get there. How much visibility do you reckon that fire gives him?"

"Fifty yards maybe. The smoke's lying very low on the other side."

"How long before the floor collapses?"

"Twenty minutes, give or take five."

Lem faded back through the crowd to the shadows. Sylvester saw him going and started waving and mouthing. No-one could hear what he said. He pulled a revolver from his trouser pocket and started waving it round his ear. The crowd stood entranced, the power of his charisma transcending the inaudibility of his harangue.

Lem came out on the platform behind Sylvester. His clothes were scorched, his hair frizzled to his scalp. The charred oak platform glowed beneath his singeing boots. He grabbed Sylvester by the shoulder but the old man twisted out of his grip, waving the pistol, pointing it at his own head, then at Lem's. Lem lunged towards him, spinning on one foot as Sylvester side-stepped and catching him a neat crack at the base of the spine with the other. Sylvester crashed headlong across the smouldering oak. Lem grabbed hold of him, lifted him bodily and carried him to the edge of the platform.

Three fire engines had arrived. They sprayed the pair with foam. Lem swung Sylvester above his head, staggering a little and shaking his head to clear the foam from his eyes. Sylvester flapped at Lem's head with his fists. Lem threw him free of the fire into the mud at the foot of the crowd, then kicked out a section of burning balustrade and leapt after. He landed off balance and rolled in the mud, cutting his face and arms on embedded cinders. Sylvester lay still. Lem got to his feet and limped over to kick him.

There was no response. He dropped to one knee and felt for a pulse, shaking a policeman's hand from his shoulder. Sylvester was alive. Mick appeared beside them.

"I've brought you a wig."

He spoke slowly, as to a child. Lem grabbed the wig and clapped it over his scorched scalp. He wondered where Mick had found it. Mick gave him a cigarette and lit it. Lem sat back in the mud with an exhausted sigh. Through someone's legs he saw the girl drive off in his car. He smiled privately and lay back in the dirt to look at the stars. Behind him the platform collapsed noisily, spangling the sky with a gush of bright embers. Two ambulance orderlies had moved Sylvester to a stretcher and were trying to administer a sedative. Sylvester protested feebly.

Lem decided to go home. He sent Mick off to find a car and moved over to where Sylvester was subsiding on his stretcher. His ankle hurt. Sylvester was struggling to keep his eyes open.

"Why?"

Lem stooped, his teeth bared in feral grin Sylvester was sure he could smell. His cheeks were gaunt with pain. He took hold of Sylvester's jowl between finger and thumb.

"I want a pair of boots made of that."

Mick was waving frantically from a car in the shadows.

MY EIGHT DAYS IN THE AUTOMOTIVE INDUSTRY

CHARLES ARNOLD

Thursday: I Become a Recovery and Recycling Engineer

The opportunity to devote my mind to other subjects is one of the most satisfactory aspects of my new job. For instance, I am now composing a telegram to my father. "Embarking upon new career," it will begin. "Today my first day in automotive industry."

That should please the old bastard; he was always fond of his GM stock. "Son," he used to say as he opened and fondled his monthly share, "the automobile is here to stay. Get a job in the car business, and you'll never be out of work."

He lived through the depression, so he knows exactly what it means to be out of work.

After softening him up with that introduction, the C note I'm asking for should be easier to take. "Am a bit strapped for funds, as no pay yet. Could you send another . . ." No, scratch "another", maybe he won't remember the first two if I don't remind him. How about, "\$100 will keep my shirts clean until payday." Much better; he's a stickler for presenting a neat appearance on the job.

My appearance, reflected in the Montgomery Wards windows, does show a need for improvement. My beard is growing shaggy and the tear in my sleeve is getting embarrassingly large.

But my attention wanders. My eyes should be sweeping the sidewalks and the curbs, never missing a square inch. I may think about other things only when my visual detection system

is operating on conditioned reflex. The mind may leave the business, but the eyes, never.

The sunlight is growing dim anyway, so I can call it quits for the day. I'll go visit my friend Buzz to tell him the news. He should be thrilled, since he's in the automotive industry too. He works the 6 to 3 pump engineer shift at the University Avenue Star station two blocks from here.

"Hi, Buzz," I say, entering his five-by-fifteen glass-encased office. "How's the automotive business?"

"It must be doing okay," he answers. "The pump price jumped from 31.9 to 38.9 overnight, and business goes on as usual." A car turns in and stops. "See what I mean?"

As Buzz tends to the customer, I notice the sign that yesterday said *Pump Price 31.9*. Now the number is hidden by a sign saying *SAVE HERE*. I note carefully the technique, having much to learn from the pros in the industry.

"Today is a turning point in my life," I tell Buzz when he has finished pumping gas and washing windows. "I myself am embarking upon a career in the automotive industry."

"No kidding. When?"

"As a matter of fact, I've already begun. Around noon I witnessed an event which I took to be an omen, the chance of a lifetime staring me in the face."

"Okay, I'll ask. What did you see?"

"An old lady dumped her coin purse while trying to put money in a parking meter. A dime rolled up and bounced off my shoe. I helped her pick up the money, and she insisted I keep the dime for being so nice."

"That was lucky."

"Luck, hell! It was providential. It was an omen."

"All right, I give. Just what is your new job?"

"I'm in the R & R line. It stands for *recovery and recycling*. I'm the world's foremost practitioner of the art. In fact, I invented the entire field."

We are interrupted by an Urbana police car. The cop looks me over as Buzz gets him some cigarettes. I force myself to look him in the eye.

"How often do they come in?" I ask after the cop leaves.

"All night long. I know just about everyone on the night shift. The state police and sheriff's deputies come in too." He lights a cigarette. "So how much did you earn today on your new job?"

"Ten cents, if you count the dime the old lady gave me."

"Say, that's real good! Are you ready to move into the Royal Executive Inn?"

"No, I'm going to stay in Merv and Grace's basement a while longer. You never can tell, business might not be as good tomorrow."

Friday: I Formulate the Fundamentals of R & R

I was right, business hasn't been as good today. Since eight this morning I've been walking the streets of Urbana without earning a cent.

But it hasn't been in vain. I've been formulating the science of recovery and recycling. The object to be recovered I refer to as a *target*. Recovery is divided into two major phases: *detection of target*, and *acquisition of target*.

Detection is by far the more difficult. First of all, there is the *False Target*. A partial list of false targets: bottle tops (un-rusted), pebbles, broken glass, pop tops, chewing gum wrappers (inner, silver side showing). The detection system must be acutely tuned to differentiating the two kinds of target.

Equipment failures are another source of difficulties. Already my locomotion system is in need of repairs; I have developed a blister on my big toe. Attention to this matter must wait, however, for a steady and unrelenting pace must be maintained at all times. Targets detected is proportional to target area surveyed: the first law of R & R.

I am also discovering there are definite hazards in the Automotive Industry. As the eyes sweep right, sweep left, distractions are bound to be registered by the peripheral sensing system. Cold stares are one, boys in blue another. Foremost among these distractions, one I term a *nonproductive target*, is exposed female legs. Earlier today, I let my detection system roam over the entire body of a nonproductive target, and nearly sliced off my gonads on a tail fin. I am beginning to realize that one cannot operate at peak efficiency in the R & R game unless sexually sated.

Saturday: I Meet Cindy and Hound Dog

So it was in the interests of automotive efficiency that I went to a dance at the Illini Union Saturday night.

Saturday is a big shopping day, hence a good day for

business. I covered the entire downtown areas of both Champaign and Urbana, and made \$2.17. Merv provided me with some old clothes, and with my beard shaved (leaving a handle-bar moustache and rakish sideburns), I set off for the campus looking fairly dapper, as befits one in my profession.

I met Cindy in the ticket line. She was wearing cut-off white Levis and a top that lacked several inches of covering her midsection.

"Do you know anything about the bands playing tonight?" I asked her.

"I came to hear Hound Dog Taylor," she said, smiling amiably. "The other group is a local one, and probably won't be too good. Hound Dog is an authentic Chicago blues man. I've got his record, and it's pretty good."

She surrendered her ticket at the door, and added as an afterthought, "He plays a slide."

"Really?" I said, following her into the Illini Room.

"A slide guitar. Slide is a particular technique." She explained it in detail, and we were soon chatting like old friends. We sat on the floor, leaning against a wall, while two folk-blues aspirants performed.

I learned she was a biology major, and hoped to work for the Environmental Protection Agency when she graduated. She wasn't pleased when informed I worked in the automotive industry, but brightened at hearing I was into recovery and recycling. Hound Dog's arrival spared me the necessity of elaboration.

Despite being worn out from the day's labors, I managed to dance several numbers with Cindy. It wasn't hard, really; Hound Dog's blues and boogies stirred my feet without much effort on my part. Unlike Cindy, however, I wasn't disappointed when Union closing time forced the dance to end at eleven. I barely had the energy left to find out how to get in touch with her again.

We drifted outside to the quad together, discussing the music, and sat down on the grass. I got her phone number, and stretched out to enjoy the night air.

"I've practically arranged for a date with you," she said, "and I don't even know your name."

"Call me Ralph. That's not my real name, but I don't believe in revealing it to people. It gives them power over you."

"You sure are a strange one," she said, sighing and stretching out beside me.

We rested in silence for a while, until a helicopter flew low

over the quad. She idly commented on how much fun it would be up there, looking down at where we were.

"I'm not so sure," I said.

"Why not? Have you ever been in a helicopter?"

"Once. On impulse, I dove through the open door of one, just as it was taking off, evacuating wounded in Vietnam. I had just finished radioing positions for an air strike, and decided I was through with cooperating in the killing. I was in trouble when it landed, of course, but I never went back to combat again."

"Really? You were actually in Vietnam?"

"No. I read all that in a story and said it just to impress you. You can't believe a word I say."

Sunday: I Begin Night Recovery

I am implementing my night recovery program. Walking down the rows of meters, my eyes follow the beam of my flashlight, sweeping left, sweeping right. Perhaps I should attach the light to a cap like a miner, saving myself the trouble of coordinating arm and eye, removing a redundancy from the system. I rue the wasted years before embarking upon my true profession.

I have covered one side of Main Street, and cross to the other side. There is just a single row of meters, so I must walk fast to cover the necessary area. Productivity is equal to area covered over time: the second law of R & R.

I quickly cover the two blocks of Main, and turn right, heading for the parking lot next to the Rose Bowl (Dancing Nitely, Sonny Norman and the Drifting Playboys). Perhaps the drunks leaving the Rose Bowl have spilled some targets for recovery.

In this lot I cover two rows of meters simultaneously, for they are stacked up back to back. Walking between them, my pace slowed to cover the increased area, I shun the false targets that litter this lot. Reaching the end of the row, my beam, radar-like, returns a glint. A silver glint. The potential target is round; my detection system registers a true target. I switch immediately into acquisition mode, take two steps, and sweep the target into my hand.

My stride is not broken. I do not stop to marvel at my success, there is no time to be wasted in the automotive industry. I must without delay switch back to detection mode and continue operation.

Heading back toward the Rose Bowl now, I walk through the second row of double meters.

There is a distraction present. My audio detection system registers a low hum and an occasional crunch. There is an automobile behind me, driving with its lights off.

Suddenly it is beside me and there is a flashlight beam in my face, destroying visual detection, so I stop.

"Lose something?" the driver says. A squad car. The policeman is a hazard to the automotive industry. This one makes me nervous.

"No, sir," I say. "I thought I saw a rabbit in the lot, and I was trying to catch it."

"What did you pick up at the end of the lot? I saw you bend over and pick something up."

Another car arrives suddenly and stops behind my back. I slowly reach into my pocket and bring out the target.

He moves the beam over my body, looking for suspicious bulges. "Do you have any identification?"

The question I have been dreading. "I don't have my wallet with me, officer. I was just on my way to the Star station to see my friend Buzz. I didn't think I would need it."

"So you're a friend of Buzz?" the one with the light says.

"Sure," the one behind me says. "I've seen him at the station with Buzz a couple of times. He's okay."

The light is turned off. "You can go on, but you better remember to carry some ID with you. It might save you from getting hauled in next time you're hunting rabbits."

"I'll remember, officer."

It's hard to forget.

Monday: I Receive a Government Subsidy

"Big news, Buzz. Today I received a subsidy. My career in the automotive industry has taken a turn for the better."

"No kidding. Where did it come from?"

"It came from the US government, of course. All subsidies do. It arrived via Western Union, a brand new \$100 bill."

"Sounds simple. How do I get a subsidy?"

"It may sound simple, but you don't appreciate the subtlety of my operation. First I had to apply for a grant. The funds were supplied to my old man through a Social Security check. Now as you know, I don't allow the use of my name; hence he sent a check to an address in Baltimore, where there lives a

certain acquaintance of mine bearing the same first and last names. He converted the subsidy into negotiable capital and wired it to me."

"Very clever."

"One must be clever to succeed in the automotive industry, Buzz. You should know that."

I paid Buzz the twenty I owed him, and looked up Merv to pay him, plus a little ahead for food. That left me just enough to splurge on a Chinese dinner with Cindy that night.

Tuesday: I Fail to Show

I missed work today. Perhaps seeking satiation is not the cure I supposed it to be.

I was out with Cindy again, and having no money left to spend, we went for a long rambling walk to Hessel Park. We stopped at a bench, and since no one was nearby, began making out a little. She stopped me before we got very far.

"What's the matter?" I asked. Her resistance didn't tally with the birth control pills she carried in her purse.

"I think you know what's the matter," she said. "I don't want this to go any farther without knowing more about you."

"Well, what do you want to know? Ask me anything."

"What's your name?"

"To you I'm Ralph."

"I know that. I want to know your real name."

"You know my feelings on that subject."

"My friends think you're a runaway criminal on the FBI's ten-most-wanted list."

"Is that what you think?"

"No," she said, and turned away. "I went to the post office and looked at the pictures."

I couldn't help laughing at that.

"It's not funny. Why do you have to be so mysterious?"

"I'm not mysterious."

"You are too."

"No I'm not. Ask me anything."

"What's your name?"

"Wilmer Higgins."

"Is that the truth?"

"No, as a matter of fact. I knew you wouldn't believe me, so I didn't want to waste my real name."

"You're impossible," she said angrily. "I'm going back home."

"Wait," I said, falling into step with her as she headed back toward the campus. "It's not fair to get mad because you won't believe my name. Let's walk around the park."

"Are you going to behave?"

"Sure I am. Ask me anything but my name."

"Where do you work?"

"I work all over Urbana and sometimes into Champaign in my capacity as recovery and recycling engineer."

"Do you salvage parts from wrecks or something like that?"

"Not exactly." Her expression told me she was getting impatient again. "What I mean is, I do salvage certain parts, but not from wrecks. And I see that they are properly recycled."

"Why won't you tell me what these parts are like?"

"Do you know anything about the automotive industry? Have you ever heard of a field called *Target Analysis*?"

"No."

"Well, I would find my work difficult to describe in laymen's terms. Suffice it to say that I find and recover certain valuable items, which are used again when they might be lost forever. However, I must not disclose my working methods in too much detail, for fear of amateurs ruining the territory. I am the first Recovery and Recycling Engineer in town, and I intend to see the job done properly."

"Then your work must be beneficial to society. You work at reducing waste, like recycling glass, right?"

"My work is very similar, in fact, but the items I recover are much more valuable to our society than glass."

"You're not feeding me bullshit again, are you?"

"Since lying about my name, everything I've said has been true."

"You once told me to never believe a word you said."

"Yes, but if I'm caught lying I always admit it. I admitted lying about my name, didn't I?"

"All right, then, tell me everything you lied about."

"You're not following the rules. You have to catch me."

"I'm not putting up with any more of this. I'm going home."

"Wait, Cindy." It was clear she would stand no more of my evasions; she stopped to listen, but I knew I had to make it good. "Let's sit down and talk. I'll try to explain why I've been reluctant to give details about myself."

We went to a park bench, near a volleyball game in progress under lights, and watched the players as I talked.

"It's essential for my purpose in coming to Urbana that certain people do not know I'm here or what I'm doing I could probably trust you with the information, but the stakes are too high to take any unnecessary risks at all. You might even get into trouble yourself for knowing. I'm sorry, but it has to be that way, at least for now."

"You're not a narc, are you?"

"Good Lord, Cindy, what an imagination you have. First you think I'm a criminal, then the cops."

"You didn't answer me."

"No, I'm not a narc."

"Are you lying?"

"I tell the truth when I say I'm not a narc. Want to frisk me and see if I have a badge?"

"You may think it's funny, but I know there's narcs running around the campus. A good friend of mine was busted last year for selling three joints to a friend of a friend, and it cost him two thousand dollars in lawyers fees to stay out of jail. That's not funny."

Jail is not funny. Jail is definitely not funny.

"If I am a narc, I've got to be the world's worst, with a cover story like mine."

"I hope you're not, I couldn't stand it if you were. It's a counter-productive occupation, like making weapons or being a slumlord. I may sound naively idealistic to you, but I think everyone should choose an occupation contributing to the general welfare. Don't you? Does your work benefit society?"

"Cindy, you'd make a great inquisitor." She was bringing me down, and we sat in silence for a while. The volleyball game was breaking up, providing a distraction. Several of the players wanted to continue, but the owner of the net was leaving. Cindy and I silently agreed to return to the campus; things had changed between us. I was at a loss for what to say.

"If we were in Nam," I said at last, "a suitable net would be easy to come by. Just go to the nearest river and get a fish net. The Vietnamese fishermen swear a lot, but can't do much about it."

"What an awful thing to say. What made you say that?"

"I know it's done. Makes a perfectly satisfactory net, too. You can have a good game of volleyball, if you don't mind kicking sand crabs out of your way after each volley."

"Were you lying when you said you were in Vietnam, or when you said you weren't?"

She knew she was violating the rules. I didn't say anything

and neither did she until we were back at her door. When I tried to kiss her, she pulled away and said, "I think maybe you're an army spy. They're crawling all over the place too."

Then she was inside and the bolt snapped shut with a solid click.

I walked back to Merv's wondering if she ever told the truth about suspecting me of these things.

Intending to get some work done, I picked up my flashlight at Merv's, but wasn't even out the door when a migraine hit. I took four sleeping pills instead, and luckily went under in a couple of hours.

Wednesday: Stabbed in the Back by Rivals

I return to Merv's exhausted; my back and feet ache considerably. I need money and made none today for the second day running.

But lo! What is this? A letter from Baltimore on the dining table. Perhaps my old man, in a fit of uncharacteristic generosity, has sent an additional subsidy. Opening it, I see two letters are enclosed. One is from my friend in Baltimore:

This arrived today. I hate to forward it to you, but it seems I must. All I can say is, I'm sorry, and I wish you luck. Frankly, I was becoming nervous in my capacity as middleman, anyway. I've been expecting the Feds to come for days now. Paranoia, to be sure, as they would have a hard time proving anything, but real nonetheless.

My hand shakes slightly as I open the other letter. What's gone wrong? It's a typed letter, signed with my old man's senile scrawl:

Your sister Sally and her husband have come to visit me and told me of your most recent escapades. Such traitorous activities cannot be tolerated in this family. I no longer consider you my son. Expect no further money from me, in cash or in my will.

I can't understand you and guess I never will. You have disappointed me once too often. This is goodbye.

Under his scrawl, a P.S.: "Sally has helped me with this letter, as my hand is no longer steady enough to write."

Thursday: I Break in New Territory

Very well, I shall go it alone in the automotive industry. Would Henry Ford quit now? You bet not. I shall break in new territory and redouble my efforts. I am now moving along Wright Street, dividing line between the cities, lined with meters in Champaign, lined with meters in Urbana. What a street! Never have I done two towns at once.

I go up the Champaign side, working my way to the university library. Nothing so far. Going down the Urbana side, which my locomotion system digs because it's slightly downhill, I cruise along and spot a target a good thirty yards away. From twenty, I ascertain it is a true target. Oh, but I'm sharp today!

Sweeping in for the acquisition, I gather the target in with a graceful motion. What an engineer I am! What perfection! What harmony!

My detection system registers a distraction in front of the Administration Building. I shall ignore it, like a good R & R man.

But wait. This distraction is Cindy herself. She has been watching me. I walk up to her and say hi. I don't like the look on her face.

"Working?" she asks coldly.

"Yes."

"So that's what recovery and recycling is all about. You're nothing but a bum. A bum and a con man."

"Wait. I can explain."

"I'm sure you can. Save it for someone foolish enough to listen."

She flees without looking back. I feel my career crumbling.

Friday: Farewell to Urbana

I admit defeat today. I am giving up my career in the automotive industry.

On my way to the Star station to say goodbye to Buzz, I pass the Rose Bowl and wave it a fond farewell. Its patrons have provided my most rewarding experiences in the business.

Crossing the bridge over the Boneyard, I spit into its lethargic current. "There," I say, "I have left my fleeting mark upon Urbana." It is pleasing to think my spittle is leaving town too, wending its way to the Gulf of Mexico.

"I'm taking off, Buzz. The automotive industry isn't doing right by me."

"Sorry to hear that. Where you going?"

"Back east."

"Turning yourself in?"

"Yes. I talked to my lawyer on the phone last night. He says the AWOL backlog is so great, if I turn myself in, they'll keep me for a while and then give me a dishonorable discharge."

"Hitchhiking?"

"Too dangerous. I'm riding the rails. See you when I get out."

"Okay."

THE COLDNESS

CHARLES PLATT

Jo awoke. The shock was as sudden as birth, as instant as electrocution.

She was lying across the front seats of a car, wrapped in an old sheepskin coat. She was horribly cold.

She blinked. The entire car interior was red, windows opaque, glowing, the color of sunlight through closed eyelids. She sat up slowly and looked down, and saw that the seat was wet and littered with ice fragments. Jo shuddered, groping for the door handle. It shifted with the sound of a fracturing limb.

She stepped out into glaring whiteness. The car was stranded in a long, wide street flooded with snow. Skin-soft, polished dunes glittered in noonday sunlight. Massive buildings stood walling in the street, their blackened faces converging down to the pinpoint horizon. Blue sky cut down between them in a vivid fluorescent wedge; it seemed close enough to touch.

Jo hugged herself, shivering, and turned to look at the car. It was slimy red all over, as if doused in blood. She grimaced, took off the sheepskin coat and used it to mop the mess off the windshield, then the rest of the windows. When she had finished the job she paused, breathing hard, looking down at the red-stained garment in her arms. A nervous tic worked at the side of her face.

She let the coat fall to the ground, then stared at it where it lay in the snow.

Somewhere behind her an outcropping of ice broke loose from a high ledge and fell, rattling down, thudding into the snow-submerged street. Cracking, crashing sounds echoed away, dying in the stillness. Jo glanced over her shoulder, grabbed the car door and pulled it open. She got in, fumbled with the ignition key. The motor came to life, she slammed the door and the car moved forward in the deep drifts. Chunks of snow levered up, broke and scattered either side. Particles on the windshield melted and dribbled like saliva.

She drove with abrupt, clumsy arm movements. The car slewed from one street to the next as she searched for a break in the desolation. But everywhere the snow was virgin, and there was silence.

A suspension bridge came into sight, its cables decked with ice dangling like crystalline seaweed. Driving closer, she found that a yellow river churned and frothed beneath, steaming in the frigid air.

Jo stopped the car and leaned forward, touching her head to her hands clenched on the steering wheel. Her thin body was rigid with tension.

A single memory had flashed in the darkness of her skull.

It was a noisy cocktail party. For half an hour she had been trapped in the corner by the fat man with the bald head and rimless bifocals and underarm sweat patches on his tailored white shirt. She leaned against the natural-brick fireplace wall, feeling the scab-texture of it behind her, and she tried to avoid his breath, which stank of cloves. Blocked by him from the rest of the room, unable to contain her claustrophobia, she finally told him he could take her home with him.

His name was Walter Steinberg.

That night torrential rain was falling, as if an entire ocean had been released in the sky. The streets were rimmed with the last remnants of week-old snow, like scum at the edges of a black river. Walter Steinberg's Continental plowed through it with the equanimity of an ocean liner.

He led her into his apartment. It was ample, hot and sweaty.

They went into the bedroom and he shut the door, poured a couple of drinks, made a couple of weak jokes and empty smalltalk before pulling off her clothes and fucking her, on his big bed.

She said nothing at all.

Afterward, he lost his temper. "... the idea of coming back here if you didn't want it, shouldn't have come on like some goddam little. . . . Don't you have a home to go to, or something? Just wanted somewhere you could spend the night? I ought to throw you back out on the street."

She spread her hands over the tufted silk bed cover, which was very beautiful, then looked up at him, leaned forward and took his jowly face between her palms, kissing him as she would a lover.

He drew back, wiped his mouth on his wrist and muttered

something, pulling his clothes back on. "Move your ass out of here by the time I get back." He slammed the door behind him.

While he was away, Jo wandered around the apartment, taking what enjoyment she could from being naked in the warmth. She ran her fingers over the soft sheen of a color TV screen, the lumpy-spiky paint of a bad impressionist painting, the leathery leaves of a rubber plant. She slumped down on to a hearthrug and stared into the flames of an imitation open fire.

She felt sick, off-balance, on the edge of something, yet with no idea of what was threatening her. She'd only asked him to take her home with him so that she could escape the party. She'd done what he wanted her to do. She thought she had.

She closed her eyes and experienced an intense vision: Walter Steinberg in her arms, his plump skin melting where she touched him, sliding off the bones, spattering onto the floor. Face softening, glasses slipping up into his forehead, teeth spreading out like cake decorations in wet frosting. She mentally hauled him into the bathroom, shovelling him off her and into the toilet bowl, flushing and flushing until all that was left was a thin slickness on the floor.

Jo stood up, trembling.

She put her clothes on, then grabbed the white cover off the bed, clutching it around her shoulders. A damp patch on the silk marked their lovemaking. She tried to avoid touching it.

Outside, she walked fast and at random through the city in the sluicing rain. She walked for hours. She finally collapsed into someone's arms, they took her somewhere warm but she was afraid to open her eyes . . .

Sitting in the car in the desolate, snow-covered street, Jo felt her memory fade. Stiff and numb, she lifted her forehead from the steering wheel and squinted into the sunlight.

A man was crossing the bridge, walking toward her, silhouetted against the glare.

Jo bit her lip. She hesitated, then opened the car door and stepped out.

The man came closer. He was tall, with ragged gray hair, a roughly-trimmed gray beard. He wore a long black overcoat. Veins stood out on his hand where he held a pole slung over his shoulder. His footsteps crunched through the snow's frozen surface, flat and dead in the stillness.

"Where are you going?" she called to him.

He paused when he was a few feet from her, studying her carefully. His face was sun-dried, dehydrated, a mass of fine lines.

Jo licked her lips. "Can I walk with you?"

"Walk with me?"

"Yes."

He shook his ragged hair out of his eyes. "If you want."

"What's . . . *that*?"

He swung his shoulder around. From the pole, on lengths of rough string, dangled anonymous discolored hunks of meat. Looking more closely, she discerned legs, torsos, faces with eroded features. They dripped yellow water. From the river.

He walked on along the boulevard, old black boots scuffing the snow, scattering it like powdered glass.

She followed him. "You . . . live near here?"

"I live . . . here." He stopped outside an apartment building whose fire escapes were festooned with webs of ice and whose plaster moldings were lined with furry frost.

He leaned his shoulder against the street door and it creaked open, snow collapsing in from the drift stacked up against it. He used his boot to bust open the inner door.

Together they climbed concrete stairs in the shadowy building, up to the second floor.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Fletcher," he said, smashing in through an apartment door.

Inside it was barren, gray with dust. The rooms had lain uninhabited for years.

They sat down opposite one another, cross-legged on the floor in the front room overlooking the street. Together they ate some of Fletcher's meat. It was warm and wet, acrid, yet very tender. It fell apart in her mouth.

Outside, clouds were moving across the sun, which was still at the zenith. As the light dimmed, snow began to fall.

When Jo had been ten years younger, she lived with her parents in a no-man's-land where suburbs ended and squandered, undeveloped land began. Trashed automobiles lay scattered in the tall, dry grass. Jo played in the cars alone, through long hot afternoons. Few other children lived nearby.

Her parents bought the lonely girl a puppy, for companionship. She was for the most part indifferent to it. But when she camped out at night for fun in a tent in the back yard, all through that summer, she kept the animal with her just to

touch its slippery-soft coat, its firm yet flexible body.

One afternoon, further from home than usual, she found a rubbish tip bigger than the rest. Jo explored the dunes of fractured metal: refrigerators, cooking ranges, TV sets, washing machines and air conditioners rusting under the open sky. She discovered a bicycle sprocket to which was attached the metal arm that had once carried one of the pedals. The rust-pitted chrome had a beautiful texture. It felt cool against her cheek.

She held it by the pedal arm and let the sprocket swing and fall against an old water tank, enjoying the *clang* it made.

She struck a radio set, wielding the sprocket like an ax, smashing the tubes and stirring their silvery fragments to make patterns in the sun.

Jo moved on. Grasping the tool more firmly, she pounded junked washer-driers, TV sets and auto fenders, an expression of serene satisfaction on her face.

Every day, after that, she carried the sprocket with her.

Meanwhile, her puppy grew larger. By fall, when it was almost too cold to camp out in the yard, the dog trampled her when she tried to cuddle it. It scraped her skin with its nails and barked and jumped on her, trying to lick her face.

One morning, at dawn, the dog ran across the yard and landed on the tent where Jo slept. She woke in panic, fighting out from under the tangle of canvas. She saw the heavy gray shape running at her again and she grabbed the bicycle sprocket and swung it.

It hit the dog's neck and dug in.

The dog fell on its side. It yelped hysterically, struggled back on to its feet and staggered from her, blood running from the wound and spattering on to the powdery soil. The yelps grew louder, more agonized. Jo felt shivery and cold in her stomach. She chased after the dog and screamed at it, hit it again, slicing into its rib cage with the sprocket, then into its skull, then into its haunches and belly. The animal flopped onto its side and twitched and its yelps became throttled, gargling sounds. Its spittle frothed. It shat convulsively. Its legs pushed out stiff. It died.

For a long time Jo sat watching it, trembling and scared. The blood kept oozing out. Flies began gathering on it.

Jo looked at the teeth of the sprocket with new concern.

Then, still with an abstracted, uncertain expression, she lifted it high and brought it down as hard as she could on her own hand, where it lay on the dry earth.

It broke three of her fingers. She never did recover the full use of two of them. After that her parents never allowed her near the refuse dumps. Her father took the sprocket away and threw it in a river on the other side of town.

After eating the meat, she felt cold and tired. The meal lay like a mass of mud in her stomach. Bones and skin pieces were in a moist heap beside her, leaking yellow fluid on to the floor.

She went over to Fletcher, kneeled in front of him and put her arms around his body under the ragged black coat. She pressed her cheek to his chest.

He embraced her and lay back with her on the floor.

She shivered. Outside, it was still snowing, swirling curtains of white among the grayness.

"I must be crazy," she said. "That's why I'm here."

He didn't answer, but his body was warm and smelled of dust and old sweat and it was somehow comforting.

She sighed. "I'm in a hospital somewhere. This is just a fantasy."

"You don't believe that." With her ear pressed to his chest, his voice sounded deep and resonant to her.

"No, I don't." She squinted up at his face. "How long have you been here?"

He shrugged. "Once I measured time by the growth of my hair and beard and fingernails. They stopped growing."

"The yellow river . . ."

"It gets more swollen. Nothing else changes."

"Have you met anyone else here?"

"Yes."

"Where are they now?"

He shrugged.

She sighed. "I'm tired."

"So sleep."

She pressed close to his warmth. His ragged beard brushed across her forehead like dry grass.

She slept.

When she woke, she was alone. There was a damp patch on the floor where the skin and bones had lain, but Fletcher had scraped up everything, creeping out while she was asleep.

Outside, it was bright. The sun was at the zenith.

She was seventeen years old when she met Richard.

Few boys had ever been interested in Jo. She was too quiet, too shy. She seemed unfriendly.

Richard was one of the few to sense something within her. He tried to be indirect, arranging chance encounters, always relaxed and easy when he talked to her. He feared that a direct approach might frighten her away from him.

But no matter how many times he saw her and made conversation with her, after being with her he felt as much a stranger to her as before. She was always pleasant, polite. She smiled. She listened.

His original interest in her had been a passing curiosity. It became an obsession. The heart of the obsession was to discover what it was about her that obsessed him. He became infuriated by her placidity.

"Don't you . . . ever feel you need someone to give you some kind of emotional support?"

"Yes. Perhaps I would like that."

"Do you ever get lonely?"

"Of course. Doesn't everyone, sometimes?"

"Have you ever fallen in love?"

"I'm not sure."

"Do you *want* to?"

"Yes, I suppose so. But it doesn't really worry me."

When he kissed her she kissed back, adequately. He held her. She held him.

He got her drunk one evening, on the advice of his friends. She became very relaxed and quietly happy and went home with him while his parents were out. Upstairs in his bedroom they kissed and he undressed her, nervous and fumbling, while she lay on the bed watching him.

When they were both naked, he held her again and kissed her again and caressed her body.

He still felt adrift. "Do you . . . want to?"

"All right."

"'All right'? What does that mean? Do you *want* to?"

She gave a tiny shrug. "Yes. Yes, if you do."

He rolled close to her again and they kissed again. But her equanimity was a harder barrier to overcome than any resistance would have been.

He turned away. He was tense and trembling. "I want you so bad."

There was a long silence.

"You don't care. You don't care a shit, do you."

"I'm sorry," she said.

"Sorry? What do you mean, sorry?"

"I'm sorry if I've made you unhappy. Look, don't worry. There can be other times."

"Can there? It'll never be any good. Ever. You're . . . The others were right. You're *frigid*."

For the first time she shifted away from him, looking away from his face. "I can't help being whatever I am."

He stood up, trying to speak. "Jo, I *love* you."

She didn't answer. She'd hoped going to bed with him would make him happy. She didn't love him, but she was ready to do whatever he wanted. She didn't want to hurt him.

"I never . . . want to see you again," he said, staring at her. She didn't answer.

"Doesn't that mean anything to you?" His voice was breaking.

He stood and watched her while she quickly pulled her clothes on. Then she hurried past him out of the room, down stairs and out of the house, away from the sound of his crying.

Jo walked down the concrete stairs and out of the apartment building. She shielded her eyes, looking up and down the empty street. There was no sign of Fletcher. Fresh snow had obliterated his tracks.

The air was cold, but she hardly noticed it any more. Folding her arms across her small breasts she strode quickly back through the drifts to her car.

It had become a low white hump, as if the city had thrown a white membrane over it to absorb it down, into the street. A couple more snowfalls and it would be submerged entirely.

Jo brushed snow off the driver's door, closed her fingers around the handle and then paused, squinting ahead to the bridge. She could hear the gushing of the river. Thin clouds of yellow vapor drifted up in the still air.

Something made her let go of the handle. Flexing her fingers, frowning, she started toward the bridge.

She didn't look back, as she walked on to the frozen, skeletal arch. Crossing it, she felt, would take her closer to the edge of the city.

But then she reached the other side of the bridge and sensed, on the contrary, she had moved closer to the heart of the city.

Again she hesitated, biting her lip. Some rationale, some motivation . . . No. There was only her intuition.

She walked on, leaving the bridge behind her. The noonday sun shone down between the tall, dark buildings. Her eyes remained fixed on the hazy vanishing point where the endless, frozen boulevard merged with the horizon.

THE STORY OF THREE CITIES

RONALD ANTHONY CROSS

Evening winds, soft. The flowers chatter in it as I pass, soft. The sun, just peeking over the fat green hill, smiles. The hill smiles.

Another day at work, over with, over with. The air is warm and yellow. They say a man's home is his castle, and yet, I see it all from here.

I believe if I'm not mistaken, I have experienced it all before. Perhaps yesterday. I have been warned against this belief.

Enough of that. Here it all is, plain and simple. The front door to my house is open; the wife and children have escaped; and the birds have eaten my pot, this time for sure. Their singing has become at once lucid and flashing. They sound as if they have gone mad, if a bird can go mad.

Luckily the front gate was closed. I doubt the little woman would go farther than the flowers, but, as they say, it is always the unloaded gun that shoots you.

A breeze ruffles the flowers, and the sprites giggle from within them. Now I catch the deeper voice of my wife among them, and the kids sound like bubbles. First things first.

I go into the house. There they are, eating my pot, and singing like mad. Fluttering around on the floor and one of them has on my hat. (The beautiful yellow one like a tall cone.)

I am furious! I sit down on the floor and begin to roll a joint.

The birds are beautiful blue pot eaters, and are good friends of mine, but are free to do as they choose, whenever they want, which is always and always with my pot! There is also a bird

that is gold, and a bird that is changing color. They are stoned too.

Finally I am high, and I go outside to look for my wife. The light is intense. For a minute I can't remember where I am. But I am there anyway.

They are still giggling. They are myriad among the flowers moving faster than the eye. I sit down to watch them play (sort of).

The short fat bird that changes color comes outside, and begins to cry in a shrill voice, "I am overwhelmed with gratitude I am overwhelmed with gratitude I am overwhelmed with gratitude."

His voice dies out. Now there are places of the mind to go.

I visit a perfect room in a spired city. Things are as clear as glass here, and the colors in the room are full of love.

Two giant ladies in lace sit before me at an elegant table. Like distant statues they drink tea among a burst of gold which is a cloud coming out of the floor and dissolving into bliss. It seems I have lived in this fine city. I know it, vaguely, as in a dream. I played in the sidewalks with other children, looking up at the tall, quaint, old, old houses with awe. And always the clouds of light from the ground, tumbling and fizzing along. I begin to see clear the mountains in the horizon line, when I awake.

The bird is pecking at my knee for attention. He is so high his eyes are crossed. He sees I am aware of him, clears his throat, and begins again. "I am overwhelmed, overwhelmed, overwhelmed. I am overwhelmed with gratitude."

He sings it over and over. I guess it is his particular song, as a bird, to sing, but in reality (where?), I, am overwhelmed.

Now in a fusillade of whistling all the birds move out on the porch.

I see one of my babies giggling and bubbling, but, as I start to get up, the sprites begin to roll and bounce him, and he disappears into their incredible speed range. Why do they move so fast? I am vaguely irritated. All I can see are glimpses of movement and flowers, and the giggling of my babies, and the whistling of the birds, and the fat, happy, smiling sun, and the pretty little plump hills.

I close my eyes to think. What did I do at work? What must I do about my wife and babies? What must I do about my birds? What must I do about my sun, my hills? Didn't all of this happen before? Yesterday, for instance. Yesterday.

With my eyes closed, I think, yesterday . . .

Then, subtly, inexorably, the spires of a perfect city begin to form in my mind. Quaint old houses, walking figures in the streets, but frozen as in a still photograph. Clouds of light rising from the ground, frozen, hushed.

Suddenly I am inside somewhere. A staircase is spiraling around and around, up and up. It seems to go on forever.

For some reason I am embarrassed. I try not to look at him, but I am fascinated.

He babbles and giggles somewhere up above me as he ascends or descends. Is it up or down he goes?

I look closely. Where it was dark all over, it is now light just around him. A beautiful warm little glow. It is up he goes, but in such a strange manner, I begin to laugh, suddenly I see he is a clown, whirling up a little, tumbling down a little. Spinning, falling, but always, somehow, winding up at a higher place than before.

If only he wouldn't fall, but then I suppose it is through these spectacular falls he has learned his tricks. And he is a polished acrobat, make no mistake about it.

Now as I begin to be accustomed to it, the beauty of it floods in on me. I am astonished that I was ever embarrassed.

He is magnificent. Here in this quaint, old city he ascends the stairs as a gleaming daredevil clown. He begins to juggle himself, his light pouring all over when I awake.

One of the blue birds is fluttering about on the ground pretending to be wounded. She has learned to do it to lead the cat away from her nest. I wonder what she wants now. She flutters over, kind of falling down a lot, and crying out in mock pain. Then she tells me, still falling over and crying out, the birds want me to put clear water in a golden bowl, and put in a golden bowl, and to take them a cake, because she is wounded.

I try to explain I don't have two golden bowls, and I am too busy to bake a cake. A little tear rolls down her beak and falls to the porch.

Now I've decided to make my move. I jump up and run into the flowers.

"I want my wife and babies," I shout. I see my plump little nude wife, giggling and squirming about in the flowers, trying to keep up with the sprites and babies. Perhaps if I can catch her, the babies will get hungry, and come to find her.

But the sprites think it's a game, and they've caught hold of her arms and they're dragging her around, twisting and turning, and I can't catch her, I can't catch her. Just as I think I

can catch her, I trip and fall on my back among the flowers, where I lie, out of breath.

The birds are all lying on their backs on the porch, watching me, and laughing hysterically.

I've had enough; I stalk out of the flowers with tears of frustration running down my cheeks, my fist raised in indignation to the clouds.

"I've had enough," I shout, "I am going to leave elfhame forever and enter the world when man kills the gentle animals for his dinner."

Suddenly the sun begins to weep. Streams of gold pour down from it and burst on the mountains. The earth begins to shake.

Now all the birds are changing colors so fast it hurts the eyes. Everything hurts the eyes. The birds shatter into rainbows. Everything shatters into rainbows. The earth is vibrating so hard I am thrown to the ground. The sun blurts out the last golden tear and goes out. Completely out.

I am in void. With a roar like a lion, a blazing red wind bursts through the dark, whipping through the flowers, tumbling my wife and babies and all of the sprites ahead of it like dandelions, then gone. All that is left is my wife's giggle. Then gone.

I am alone. There is a new sun but he is dull and he doesn't smile. The birds are all passed out on the porch. I am alone. Life is gone from the air, the flowers. The hills have forgotten me. When the birds wake up, they will have forgotten me, and they will fly away. Two tears roll down my cheeks. I close my eyes to think, to think, to whisper, softer, softer . . . Hush, I am somewhere in the city; I can sense perfection in the dark. What dark? I can see now that it has been light here all along, but that I somehow perceived it as dark. Shapes take place.

The two ladies drink their tea, but the little clown is here now, doing his tumbling upon the table, all the time babbling and giggling to me a constant stream of nonsense such as, "Rickitikitiki outside in. Rickitikitiki inside out. First you go inside, then you bring some of the inside outside, then you drag some of the outside inside, then you push more of the inside outside no yes no yes no yes."

He catapults into the sugar bowl where he swims frantically, hurling sugar like mad. The elegant old ladies drink their tea like distant statues, dignified, solid. It is not necessary for them to notice him, and it is not necessary for them to not notice him. What he is saying so directly applies to them, I wonder if

he's telling them what to do or they're forcing him to talk that way by their perfect tea drinking.

Suddenly he is staggering about on the very edge of the table screaming, "Rickitikitiki outside inside, no yes, you us, no yes, old ladies clown, no yes, outside inside, all one . . . one . . . one . . . one."

He stumbles, falls from the table to his doom. But no. One of the old ladies has just finished her tea, gets up and carries the cup into the kitchen. A Persian cat like a fat powder puff jumps out of her lap, goes to a certain place under the table, stretches, then lies down and goes to sleep.

Now what once seemed a tragic error becomes another glowing glorification of action. At the last moment, the little clown straightens out and does a beautiful dive into the Persian cat.

At the perfect moment, the old lady in the kitchen turns on the water which sprinkles into separate bell-like notes of celestial applause, as the clown stands up and bows, and the cat opens its goofy, crossed eyes.

One, one, one, the word, or the ghost of it, echoes like an oscilloscope, somehow getting louder and louder. The clouds of light puff up, grow brighter and brighter until everything is light.

I can sense perfection in the light. What light? I can see now that it has been dark all along but I somehow perceived it as light. I awake.

I feel life pressing about me as air. Smiling at me as sun, as hills.

I can feel my city within building my city without. The air gets warmer. The color of the sun deepens. Then soft as a sigh comes a gentle wind. It dances among the flowers. I begin to catch glimpses of flower sprites at play. Then the wind puts down a new wife and new babies.

Now we go into the house, while the babies crawl back into the flowers for a while. We carry out some pot and put it in the back yard for the birds to have their party. Tomorrow we will buy them little golden bowls and whatever they need for their dreams.

I look into her eyes; I feel her love. The sun smiles, the hill smiles. Day after day, is she the same, or is she different? Holding hands we close our eyes to think. To whisper, softer, softer.

Things are as clear as glass here and the colors in the room are full of love.

TUBS OF SLAW

RACHEL POLLACK

Billy, Margaret, Hernandez, Frankie, Irwin, Lelanda, and Galadriel received their genitals on a pink Friday afternoon. They were disappointed to discover only two varieties, the first a sort of coin-shaped apparatus, oblong, irregular, and squishy on the one side, flat on the other; the second was a floppy tube, rounded on one end, with a sack containing two chestnuts on the other (actually they only said "chestnuts" provisionally, since they couldn't find a zipper to open the sack). There were four of each, which seemed peculiar—why not send seven, so each might choose between the meager assortment?

"Let's not fight over it," urged Hernandez. "Please." The week before, a sanitation officer had mistakenly bit her cyanide pill and died outside the house, but the children had quarreled so long over her body that the organs just decayed and no one could do anything with it.

WILL YOUR BODY TO A NECROPHILIAC

Margaret held up one of each. "Do you suppose we didn't order right?"

The Astronomical Underground and the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR) have released this joint statement:

The world needs more sexes, not less.

Two new sex organs:

1. A hollow tube. Admittedly of limited use. The outer

surface can penetrate, the inner surface can be penetrated. A hand may squeeze the tube flat, and then the hand rubs the outer surface, while the inner surface rubs itself. Other manipulations will suggest themselves.

2. A standard vagina-clitoris, with a standard penis protruding above the clitoris, *and* a hand residing inside the vagina. The penis may bend back so both organs may rub against a pleasing surface. The penis may bend forward and rub the vagina. If one uses the vagina heterosexually the bent back penis will rub against the partner's pubic hair. Similarly, the penis used heterosexually will rub the vagina near the partner's anus. The hand may remain inside the vagina, where it can caress the inner walls, and let the juices ooze between its fingers. Or the fingers can reach out and manipulate the clitoris, groin, anus. Or the entire hand can extrude and manipulate the penis. Please note: the hand may stroke or finger the vaginal interior while the penis rubs against or penetrates a partner. Unfortunately, the hand cannot manipulate the penis while a partner rubs against or penetrates the vagina (though, of course, the hand can greatly increase the partner's sensations). To eliminate this inconsistency we are considering adding two silky or velvet tentacles above the pubic hairs.

While Irwin searched the wrapping paper for instructions Galadriel held up the coin-shaped genital. The oblong's long diameter measured only about two and a half inches while the width measured an inch.

Frankie said, "Let's get started. Where's the instructions?"

Irwin said, "I don't think there are any."

Frankie said, "Well, that's damn stupid."

Lelanda, waving one of the tube things, said, "Not really. It's more fun if we figure it out ourselves."

Galadriel stuck her finger in the slit. The inside felt all warm and juicy, but when she looked behind the flat coin she could not see her finger coming out the other side.

A "clone" is a laboratory duplicate of a living creature. More than just a double, your clone is you, your features, your thoughts, your responses.

Would you fuck your clone?

Who goes on top?

"Hey," called Frankie, "look what I can do with this one." He—or she, Frankie had so far evaded the Sexual Preference Act—held one of the tube things, near the base, above the chestnuts. While her left thumb and forefinger gingerly held the three-inch floppy tube his right forefinger stroked the folded flesh along the bottom. To everyone's delight the funny contraption first stiffened, then actually enlarged, over twice its original size.

They all tried this new trick several times, just as they had all poked their fingers through Galadriel's magic slit.

It was Irwin who first discovered how to fasten them. Absurdly simple, really; he wetted the tube's base and the coin's back, then stuck them on his arm. This too everyone tried, dancing around the room or leaning out of the window, waving their genitals.

Then Billy had an idea. He popped a coin thing off Lelanda's arm and stuck it to his palm. While he dodged Lelanda's kicks he rubbed the "squishy", as they called it, all over his face and body. At one point, when he grazed his nipple across the little knob Frankie had discovered just above the slit, he found the sensations so pleasurable—a kind of wave-like chill sweeping the body, like a solid sneeze or a yawn, except more so—he staggered backwards and almost toppled over the couch.

Meanwhile Lelanda had yanked off the "fishy" stuck on Billy's chin and applied it to her forehead, above the nose. As she nodded her head her nose rubbed the fishy and soon, just as she'd suspected, the genital stiffened and leaped upwards. Then, however, nothing was rubbing it and a moment later it collapsed again. But, of course, soon after it touched the nose, up it went. "Look," Lelanda squealed, "I've discovered perpetual motion."

If all men were sisters, would you marry your brother?

Who goes on top?

Frankie had been running around the room, jabbing her fishy in people's backs. Now she fastened it to his forehead and called Lelanda. The two children wiggled their noses until their fishies jerked upright, then they charged each other, waving their heads so their genitals would clash like swords. As they vaulted the couch and skittered across the table they screeched and yelled their excitement. Then suddenly the two unicorns

stepped back and stared at each other, amazed, breathless. After a moment of throbbing and jerking a narrow slit opened at the fishies' rounded ends, and gush, huge spurts of rich white liquid shot across the room. Within seconds they'd drenched each other's faces and chests; afterwards, with everyone laughing, they smeared the sticky stuff on the other children's faces.

"There's really a lot you can do with these things," said Irwin.

"Maybe so," said Billy, "but there still should be more than two."

Necrophiliacs don't need your cheap pity or your pious charity. Do you think we want your old puffy flab? Will your body to a toy factory for all we care. What Necros need is to stop hiding in morgues and funeral parlors and *demand* the bodies we *want* while they're still *fresh*.

OUT OF THE CRYPTS AND INTO THE STREETS!

Marcia Grezhny

Necrophiliac Liberation Front

After everyone else had tired of their new genitals, repacked them, and cycled off to the Memory Distribution Center, Galadriel still probed the squishy stuck to the palm of her hand. Where did her finger go? Had she discovered the Spiritual Realm, long suspected but never delineated? She withdrew her wet finger, smelled and licked it. Though it tasted pleasantly enough the juice did not induce any mystic hallucinations.

She held the genital near her left eye and her right hand parted the slit. Inside she saw a vast chamber, like a damp cavern, miles wide and infinitely deep. Tiny creatures, black fur and pinched faces, like feline monkeys, slid down the concave walls. Everywhere the floor and walls oozed the sweet-smelling genital juices.

The poor silly creatures danced and hissed and jabbered madly when they saw Galadriel's unblinking eye.

TULPA

JACK M. DANN

Sitting on a velour couch in his expansive living room, John Dorian looked at six Rinfret pictures lying side by side on a coffee table. He had not taken off his shirt and tie; his trousers and underpants hung about his ankles as he leaned back into the couch. He held his penis between his thumb and forefinger; it remained a semi-limp erection: a poor tool for a masturbation dream.

They had all been utilized too many times, except for the second frame from the right—the brunette. He had grown tired of her in a few days, and as he thought about it, he had grown tired of her predecessor, the pale blond, in a week. But on his meager allowance he could not afford to buy a frame picture twice a week. If he could not find satisfaction in a Rinfret the only other alternative would be flesh with all the attendant guilt and frustration.

Girls glossed and flossed past John Dorian every day. From a distance they were desirable in their clinging skirts and push-ups, but up close they flawed. Their make-up was packed too thick, giving their faces a crayonned appearance; scars and acne mounds were visible through the flesh cosmetic; hair was frizzy and straggly at close inspection; features crudely formed; perfume too much or too little; perspiration fermented under their arms, legs, and inside their buttocks, ready to turn sweet and sticky during lovemaking.

John Dorian considered himself a good lover. He knew how to squeeze the eyeless salmon head to prevent premature ejaculation; he knew how to move his tongue sideways across an erected nipple while he sucked and fondled a perfectly formed breast. But it was no use. Although he had studied diligently, he mastered only the mechanics of the act, none of the passion. Seeing a lovely face writhing in supreme agony had satisfied him for a while, but this too had become uninteresting.

He tried to forget the few times he had tasted exultation—

times when he had lost his self-consciousness. But the soft fleshy images bobbed to the surface: ladies who refused to be forgotten. They had sucked and squeezed him; they had wrapped their young legs around him and straddled him until he was dry and limp. But they were flat like little boys (except for one who was as fat as a stereotyped domestic) and did not wear synthetics. And none of them wore make-up. And they did not shave their pubic hair, that sweat forest of the unimaginable. He had pounded against their mats, rode around and through their tangles, fondled their coarse skin, smoothed their long hair. The thought sickened him. He was finished fucking breastless boys with vaginas. (And he was finished sucking flabby untreated breasts.) He had burned such perversions out of his mind; only a few distorted memories escaped to remind him of the latent repulsiveness of women.

The real thing was picturegirls—the perfect little creatures that looked out at him from their window rectangles as they fingered themselves, tongues darting back and forth, breasts bobbing as they assumed six different positions.

Here were women to fire his imagination while he stoked himself. It was a clean procedure, easy and quick. And it did not involve conniving, waiting, watching, begging, talking, excusing. It was unfortunate that companionship was also lost, but one glance at a little goddess and his emptiness would be salved—until time and use (and a corrosion compound) made the goddess mundane.

Resting his head on the edge of the couch, eyes closed, foetal position, he visualized a composite of the most perfect goddesses. He could recall them line by line—visual recall—not the grey amorphous shapes of the daydreamer. He worked his penis as he drew their forms unto an ultimate orgasm and then fell asleep as the self-cleaning carpet imbibed his sticky fluid.

When he awoke, the dream figure was still tangible, still moving in front of him, pouting, gurgling, inviting. Closing his eyes, he shook his head, as if to fling her out of his mind. He opened his eyes. Her form was quickly dissipating, but she was still real, walking toward him, bits of cotton flesh dropping in her wake. Her flesh spun away before she could reach him.

He concentrated on trivia to clear his head, but the phantasm remained an ominous presence.

The glow of the apartment warmed him, and for the first time in months, he felt no hangover of guilt. He had forgotten to cancel dinner and the automatics were clattering around the

kitchen preparing a light evening meal of eggs Parmentier. They had probably uncorked the sour white wine. He was not hungry, but it was too late to retract.

Musing over the parsley flecked omelet, he considered the abnormality of his masturbation dream and its vivid after-image. Hallucination, he thought. Not dream. Hallucination. A tingle of anticipation fanned out across the back of his neck.

He had achieved homeostasis by a careful balancing of masturbation with a fairly even diet of copulation which he pretended to enjoy. But conjuring up that composite had damaged his state of equilibrium. He was very suggestible, he knew that. He had once tried yoga but had to stop because of lingering after-images. Yet he had just conjured a dream image without any fuss, or fifteen minute depth concentration periods, or hypnosis. It just flopped out of his mind, a slick oiled rag doll. He should never have started it, he told himself.

It had fermented. It had waited three years to come out. Now, just when life was approaching normalcy. Something chuckled in his mind; he tried to ignore it.

Leaving the kitchen to the automatics, he pecked out the coordinates of a woman he had been introduced to a few weeks before at a party. No, he thought, slamming his fist against the release node. I have to resolve it now. Alone. He might as well see it through; it had been clawing at his subconscious for three years. It would have to surface sometime, so it might as well be now.

Feeling better, less constricted, he inhaled a narcodrine, walked outside into the brisk night air, and sat down on a stone bench before his pool. Its rainbow colors blended with his thoughts as he watched a plastic red slick merge into liquid gold.

Monotonously, slowly, he talked sleep to himself, relaxing as a familiar wave of numbness passed over him. The room gradually fell away, leaving only a strained whisper in its stead. Let it go. Let it come out. Get it over with. Relax. Deeper and deeper, falling away, falling, falling away. Falling, falling, falling. His eye itched. Don't think about it. Falling away. Deeper. Deeper. Deeper. Once he got to the core of this hallucination, he could give himself a posthypnotic suggestion or, if need be, see a doctor.

Rationalization. Try again. Mumble sleep. Floating away. A hovering shape. Finally, in upper case letters:

SOMNAMBULISM

She stared at him from the edge of the pool, her tiny feet

kicking at the swirling colors drifting near the rim. He permitted his eyes, just opened, to be locked into her stare. She was intent; she did not smile. Her face was momentarily hidden in color.

Repressing the excitement growing inside him, he commanded her to sit beside him. She did not move. Focusing his concentration, he tried again. She continued staring at him.

Without reservation, he unzipped his fly and inserted his hand. She interrupted him by laughing, her large eyes narrowing into slits. Embarrassed, he quickly removed his hand. Why am I losing control? Why doesn't she respond? He had better cancel this apparition and let a psych probe it out, he thought. Utilizing all of his remaining will power, he closed his eyes, tried to relax his body, and mumbled *sleep* to himself. But she remained under his eyelids, her blond hair spread across her pale shoulders, her taut heavy breasts pushed together by her arms which formed a vee, her elbows perched precariously on her knees.

"You stupid bastard. Pervert. Open your eyes; I'm not going to disappear."

The sliding doors opened and a small automatic hummed past John Dorian and stopped at the perimeter of the pool. "Would the young lady care for an aperitif?" it asked, exactly as it had been programmed to do.

"You see," she said, spreading her long legs apart. "I am real. And you are my pervert conjuror which, I suppose, is a distinction of sorts. Does that make you feel better?"

The automatic repeated its question. Receiving no reply, it made a silent exit. Exactly as it had been programmed to do.

She *must* not be real, he thought, trying to rationalize her disobedience. Deftly, she squeezed her finger between her legs and assumed a #1 pose. He could not detect a single skin break, acne scar, or blemish. She cannot be real, he thought as he walked around the pool to inspect her. He felt a surge of confidence. She swiveled toward him on her buttocks, her legs slightly lifted above the smooth plastic floor. Looking at him coquettishly, she wet her upper lip with the tip of her tongue.

He extended his arms, but could not touch her—she might not to be a tactile apparition. He could not take a chance. Uncertainty was preferable to disappointment; it would save him from wrapping his arms around a panting, moaning clot of air.

Eyes closed, her face lined with the tension of orgasm, she lolled back and forth to the tempo of her ever increasing jabbing. Standing before her, he began to undo his trousers, but

she squinted her eyes open, jerked her head back, and having satisfied herself, began to laugh at his inept attempts.

"Pervert, pervert," she whispered, her mouth dry, her eyes pale, languid reflections of self-satisfaction.

His face flushed, he turned away and redressed himself.

"Go on," she said. "Laugh at me if you like." She gave him a mock smile, lips curled back from her teeth. "But you won't laugh because I'm all yours, and I look the way you want me to look, and I treat you the way you want to be treated."

Way you wanted to be treated. Don't you? Don't you? "You're crazy," he said, realizing how ridiculous it sounded.

"Well, you've got your picturegirls. Use them. They won't laugh at you." She walked into the house, her hands cupped under her large breasts. Turning to Dorian, she cocked her head, opened her pink mouth in an OOOOO and rolled her nipples between her fingers. "Is this the way you want me to do it? Or do you like this better?" she asked, sliding her fingers through her blond field of pubic hair.

That was not there before. She had spread her legs before him and her vulva had been pink and clean. But now . . . Admonishing a warm glow that began to settle under his stomach, he followed her into the house. Don't follow, don't answer, give yourself another suggestion. She won't allow it, she'd come back. And softly spoken from the rear: I don't want to.

"What do you want me to do now, pervert?" she asked as she straddled the back of the couch, moving gently back and forth across the smooth velour.

"I want you to stop calling me pervert."

"No you don't. I love you John Dorian. I want you John Dorian. Is that better? Pervert."

He inhaled another narcodrine.

"And you're afraid to touch. Is it real or isn't it?" she asked, running her forefinger around her right nipple. "This one is," and pointing to the other, "this one isn't. How's that, John Dorian? I'm going out," she said, pulling a push-up brassiere out of the air and pulling it under her breasts. Before he could reply, she was past the automatic, out the door, and into the quiet tree-lined street.

He could stop it. She would come back if he tried. He had to make a decision. Ridiculous. She would be back. She was his conjuration. He might as well follow it through to the end and examine himself in the light of these new circumstances. A poor rationalization for a rationalization.

The automatics had sensed her presence. Flesh form, flesh

form. Anyone might take her. But she was his. Back to Rinfrets. Back to Rinfrets stuck in their frames, prefabricated movements, stuck in their frames.

He ran into the street. He could not see her. Uncertain where to run, he stood on the curb trying to decipher the black forms drifting in the distance.

To your right. Toward the mono. She was ahead of him, beckoning to him, then turning, walking toward the glistening mono-train hesitating in its berth. It waited, ready to transport a fare to the centre of the city. A screech, and the impatient train laboriously pushed itself away. The walk-roof arched stiffly above her, blotting out the wavering light of the Pleiades. She stopped at an intersection, a four-tiered raceway extending into the Christmas tree darkness. Waiting for him. Rubbing her thighs, wetting lips, she waved him on.

As he walked faster, dreaming of holding his penis against her skin, she grew larger. But the pubic hair . . . He concentrated on her lovely face, not permitting his eyes to drop to her cleft, not a peek at the cascade of iridescent hair spreading from her navel. She grew larger. The pubic hair would not be there. His eyes lowered with each step. Disgusted, he rejoiced and began to run.

And so did she. (But she was only three feet away from him.)

He followed her around a corner, past a chalk building, through an alleyway of skittering movement, past an auto service. The distance between them grew. Dorian was out of breath. He started to cough.

She stopped under a marquee, superimposing herself on an old woman leaning against the stone wall of the alcove. Cautiously, John Dorian slowed down. He could see a strand of spittle hanging from the corner of the old woman's mouth. She was drunk. She talked and sang to herself, but the words he heard were not synchronized with the movements of her lips.

Here I am. I will be perfect. I won't move. I won't sweat. I won't breathe. I won't smell. I won't come. For you. For you.

She vomited and then giggled as she rubbed her back against the stone.

Waver. Endless retinal frames. Snap. Bleary eyes. An unheard scream superimposed on pouting lips. Wrinkles.

Touch me. Touch me. I won't move. Feel me. Love me. Look at me, not a hair, not a pock, not a scratch. She was leaning against black glass, her figure a shade lighter than the shadows wrapped around her.

He was in front of her, touching her, stroking her, holding himself, licking, biting, scratching, tearing away strands of sweat drenched clothes. Her beautiful face. Stone. Whimpering, clawing, a sensation of cleanliness shook through him. He pushed into her, holding her breasts for comfort.

Waver. Endless retinal frames. Snap. A second. Another scream and her picturegirl face was replaced by a haggard mushroom head smiling in resignation.

It did not matter now. She was a picturegirl. Bathing inside her, he whispered happily into her deaf ear.

AN OVERLOAD

BARRINGTON BAYLEY

They always met by television, usually once every three months, always with much argument. The meeting chamber, though its location was secret and it possessed neither door nor windows, had a dignity befitting its role. Its walls were panelled in ancient grained oak, its floor was deeply carpeted. Mahogany, another near-extinct and much valued wood, composed the boardroom table. On its dark shining surface rested six holo television sets arranged so that the stage-screen of each could view all the others.

Today Sinatra was sour. "You know what I think?" he said, stubbing out a cigarette with a derisory gesture. "I'll tell you: this thing's not worth talking about."

Bogart gave a typical puzzled frown, shrewd preoccupied eyes shifting from side to side as he spoke. "If it bothers us it's worth talking about. This guy Karnak seems to be making progress."

"Aw, nuts." Sinatra's blue, disturbingly hot eyes came to rest on Bogart; his lean face was sardonic, the wide mouth twisted wryly. "He's just another bum."

"Remember Reagan," Bogart continued defensively. "Not so long ago he was sitting right here with us. Until, that is, he became so over-confident, began over-extending and thinking he could get into SupraBurgh. Suddenly there he was dying on a rising curve."

Cagney shook his head sadly. "Not even viable for the voters any more."

"I remember what it was like seeing him go. Spooky."

Sinatra chuckled. "Sure, I remember Reagan. He had it coming: that's what you get for meddling with SupraBurgh. None of us will make that mistake again." He paused reflectively, a cigarette held midway to his lips. "You know, when I go over my piece of his holdings sometimes I think I can hear him whining through the circuits."

"We all can," Raft said shortly in a flat gravelly voice. "Because we all took a piece of him. I'd like to think he'd be happy knowing we profited by his fall. But I'd also like to think it can't happen to me." The grisly crack came out of Raft's poker face deadpan. Cagney and Schultz grinned slightly.

"It can't," Sinatra affirmed. "We've got things sewn up too tight now."

"If we stick together it can't," Bogart corrected. "Maybe Reagan wouldn't have hit the dust if some of you guys hadn't been so quick to pull the rug from under him."

"Yeah, okay, that's right," said Sinatra hastily, cutting off the angry protests from the others. "If things get rough we stick together, okay? Karnak has only taken one ward so far. That's a long way from being a threat. Now let's get on to other business. Take a look at this."

An oak panel slid aside to reveal a holo stage. A simple sine wave moved slowly across it, was momentarily transformed into a stationary bell-shaped probability curve, and then broke up into a dizzying sequence of graph curves, the axes standing out in contrasting colours.

Filling in with a terse commentary, Sinatra watched the flickering curves calmly. "I guess you can get the picture from this. Intricative Products, working in harness with Stylic Access Services, are on their way to capturing the whole of the design-percept market. This will mean that a lot of smaller businesses not currently in syn will be brought in syn. Now here are the production breakdowns leading through to maybe four months time."

A new set of dancing, swinging curves appeared at the rate of two a second. Sinatra held one of them for a few moments.

"Here's the aesthetic/inventive index of the stuff we'll be releasing in a short while now."

The display went into motion again. "I'm giving you the picture because I don't want you to go rocking the boat. Putting smaller people out of business isn't only a matter of seizing their markets, it's also a matter of denying them operating capital. Now for a short while, as a result of my activities, there's going to be a sort of vacuum in property in-decor, which is an associated area of commerce. Some of you, particularly Lancaster and Cagney, might be tempted to pour money into it. But it's a fact that capital flows easily from the property in-decor field to the design-percept field. So back off, willya? Otherwise you might louse up my operation."

The display ended and the holo stage showed an indefinite empty depth of a pale lilac tint.

Raft grunted.

"And why should we do you such a favour?" he asked.

"Oh, I wouldn't ask you to do it as a favour," Sinatra replied mildly. "Just so as to be open and above board, I'll show you the current programme of another of my properties, Up-SupraBurgh Road Mercantile." The holo started up again, dazzling in its rapid disclosure of professional information. "If this doesn't give some of you heart failure, it should. It shows just how ready I am to start forcing the pace in the Up-SupraBurgh outlets. Before long I could—if I wanted to—squeeze you out of some of these routes altogether. You wouldn't like that. So it's a straight deal. I'll back off Supra-Burgh if you'll back off property in-decor."

"We all agreed not to try to monopolise the upgoing routes," Raft said without expression.

"I hope I won't have to," Sinatra told him affably.

"What are you trying to put over on us, Frank?" It was Lancaster who spoke now, anger edging into his softly incisive, muscular voice. "Let's take another look at that crap you just handed us." And he projected Sinatra's own graphs back on the wall holo. "It's kind of funny how it compares with what *I'm* doing in Up-SupraBurgh."

More curves, Lancaster's graphs this time, glittered out at them in quick succession, like spitting out pips. "Get that, Frank? Put it together, all of you. Frank is telling us he and I share seventy-three per cent of the upgoing trade. Add your own business to it, and how do you explain a total of one hundred and *eighteen* per cent?"

"*Are you calling me a liar, you—?*" Sinatra leaned towards Lancaster with an incredulous, outraged look. He flung an arm towards the wall holo. "*This* is how you put those figures together, and *this* is what it means in a year's time." And while he spoke he shot an even faster display at the holo stage.

Cagney spoke up, lazily. "Frank is always talking about bringing out-of-syn business into syn. What for? I notice most of these properties seem to wind up in Sinatra's own stable. What are you gonna do, Frank? Bring the whole of Under-Megapolis into syn?"

"Sure, I'd like it that way!" Sinatra bellowed.

Bogart lit a cigar, blowing aromatic smoke that seemed to drift out of the holo and into the room. "Great. So whenever anything goes wrong the voters have nobody to blame but us."

"Yeah, that would be great all right," Lancaster echoed.

There was a moment's silence. Sinatra calmed himself, glancing around him at the syndicate that made up this hexagon of power: himself, Bogart, Lancaster, Raft, Cagney, and on Sinatra's left, Schultz, a furtive, dour figure who spoke but seldom.

"Nothing ever goes wrong in the outfits *I* run," he declared.

"Nothing except the credibility of your own accounts," Lancaster answered tightly. "Let's put your figures to the test, Frank. How about if we analyse them *this* way?"

The argument raged back and forth. The graph displays flickered so fast as to be on the edge of visibility, merging into a rainbow blur.

As the vert-tube dropped mile on mile the golden glitter of SupraBurgh vanished. After a brief limbo-like transit through the abandoned area of Central Authority, Obsier was plunged deep into the planet and entered UnderMegapolis.

Endless forms, vistas and hues slid into one another as the level-within-level mightiness of Obsier's home supercity swung past him. In a frightening, alien way SupraBurgh was stunning, but here in UnderMegapolis was the kind of immensity, the kind of power, he was familiar with, and it impressed him anew to return to it this way, falling like a bullet in the v-tube. Here it was: deep thrusting place of hegemonies, below reach of the sun, ancient and yet eternally modern.

Perched above it, using it for a foundation, was SupraBurgh, spreading up and out like a great tree to glory in the sunlight that struck, to Obsier's mind, almost supernaturally out of a naked sky. Occasionally, interstellar ships arrived to settle like birds in that tree, or departed from it. That, perhaps, was the strangest thing of all.

Long ago the two conurbations had gone by a single name: Megapolis. They had been governed as one supercity by a single Central Authority. But gradually its functions had withered away. The upper and lower parts of the supercity had diverged in social and economic terms, developing their own forms of government, institutions, even languages, until now they were aliens to one another and forebore all contact except for a certain amount of trade.

Some idea of the time that had passed since Megapolis had schismmed could be gained from the fact that Central Authority (even now, out of a curious respect for the past, neither side

attempted to occupy its deserted corridors), which once had been at ground level, was now half a mile into the earth. Megapolis was a great plug drilled into the planet's skin and it had sunk by its own weight. So close was the floor of Under-Megapolis to the floor of the Earth's crust that it was able to draw heat from the basaltic mantle beneath.

It was good to escape from that oppressive feeling of vast expanses of air and sunlight.

The v-tube decelerated fiercely and came to a halt under the greenish radiance of serried strip-lights that stretched away into the distance. Clutching a sheaf of documents, Obsier made his way toward the nearby Schultz In-Town Transit Services Station.

"So they wouldn't wear it?" Mettick asked.

"No," Obsier told him. "And I guess that will be my last trip to SupraBurgh. In a way I'm glad of it. I don't like it up there."

"Did you get *any* offers out of them?"

"Not one. They're not interested."

"Is it because they don't use ipse holo up there?"

"That's true, they don't, but I don't think that's it. They must have all the technical data available. We could get it built ourselves, perhaps, if they'd fund it. They're just not interested. They don't want to know us down here."

"It's hard to understand. If an offer like that was made to any of the syn bosses they'd grab it like an alligator grabbing meat."

"Their system is different to ours. They're not democratic, and not oligarchic. They have some sort of elitist social structure. They act as though we don't exist . . ."

Mettick shrugged. "*We* act as though *they* don't exist . . . You know why I think they won't play? They're afraid of the syn. Do you think that's right?"

Obsier placed his papers in a desk drawer. "Maybe. It's more likely that they have an agreement with them: no interference in each other's pitch. But it's more than that, too. There's a difference in mentality we could never cross. It was a mistake to think we could."

"Yes, I suppose so." Mettick was reflective for a moment. "Well, we'd better tell Karnak."

They went through a door into an inner office where the campaign team was working. Girls with tabulators were feed-

ing in data for the prediction polls. If Karnak could gain this second ward in the imminent local election he would be riding high.

Mettick paused by the supervisor's desk. "Is the Man in?"

She nodded. Mettick knocked on a door, and they entered. Karnak was surrounded by his aides, hard at it as usual.

He was the epitome of the tireless, hard-working politician. When he wasn't actively campaigning he was busy on some side project, as now: trying to analyse the syn—the vast business syndicate whose bosses ruled UnderMegapolis by reason of holding all the seats on the Magisterial Council. To gain such a seat for himself—to be a magister—and break the syn's monopoly was his life's ambition.

A small holo screen was reeling off a list of the properties owned by one of the syn tycoons, Sinatra. Momentarily Obsier let his eye run through the exotic language of present-day business: Intricative Products; Non-Linear Machinations Compositied; Stylic Access Services; Up-SupraBurgh Road Mercantile; Andromatic Enterprises; Andromatic On-Return Hook-Up . . . and on and on.

Karnak killed the holo and turned to face the newcomers. Straight away Obsier could feel the man's charisma. The force of it struck him anew every time he came into Karnak's presence, like an enveloping field of magnetism. That magnetism was a necessary prerequisite: all the magisters had it.

"I'm sorry," Obsier said immediately. "SupraBurgh won't finance an ipse holo set-up."

Karnak took the news as a great man should. He paced the room, his long-jawed, handsome features briefly turned inward in concentration. "Okay, so that avenue is closed," he said firmly. "We shall just have to find another way."

He stopped in front of the campaign charts that covered one wall. "I'm confident we're going to win this ward. That will give me the right to contest the supercity general election in a month's time."

He swung round to face them again. "But let's not kid ourselves: ipse holo is the key to success on a supercity scale. We can do quite a lot with ordinary holo in a ward election, because it can be backed up with personal appearances. But in a population of a hundred million, where holocom is of the essence—" He made a gesture. "Just imagine me coming over like a shadow and Sinatra or Lancaster sitting right there in the room, with all the spiel they're able to put over."

There was a short silence. "If we sank all our assets maybe

we could come up with the needed amount, though I doubt it," one of the aides said tentatively. "But we'd be really out on a limb."

Karnak nodded.

"It isn't just that," Mettick injected. "There's the technical data too. I've done some research in the library. It isn't all there: the syn has kept some of it private. Which means that businesses capable of artifactoring ipse equipment are all syn-owned, too."

Another of the aides slapped his fist in his palm. "They've really got it sewn up," he said savagely.

"It's getting so they're sewing everything up," said the aide who had first spoken. The rate of absorption of businesses taken over by the syndicate—brought into syn, in the jargon—was one of the things Karnak's team liked to grouse about.

"*Right*: this is what we'll do," said Karnak, cutting into their talk like a hand cutting through smoke. Their attention snapped on to him: the Man had made a Decision.

"We'll make an election issue of it, starting as of right now," he told them. "The syn has a monopoly of ipse holo. That's undemocratic—it should be available to *all* magisterial candidates. We'll press the idea that the owners of ipse equipment should lease it, or even loan it to anyone on the elective list. Wrap it up in a package—the ever-increasing hold the syn is having on our lives, the stricture on routes to the top in our society, and so forth. But press it hard."

"Hmm." An aide nodded thoughtfully. "The syn's reply will be that we are trying to subvert the plutocratic principle—anybody not successful enough to have their own ipse apparatus doesn't deserve to have it, dig? But it will definitely put them on the defensive. They might even have to let us use their ipse to avoid looking mean and brutish. It's good, K, it's good." He nodded again, enthusiastically.

"Maximum publicity," Karnak intoned. "Get to work on it, you crowd, there isn't much time." He waved his arms; the aides began to leave the room. "You two stay," he said to Obsier and Mettick. "I've another little job for you."

When the three of them were alone Karnack settled himself in his plush black swivel chair and leaned back, placing his finger-tips together.

"Did you have a hard time in SupraBurgh?" he asked, shooting a glance at Obsier.

Obsier shrugged. "A little."

"It makes me wonder—you know, everything's so different

up above. If it changes your outlook at all when you come back."

Obsier frowned. The question was interesting. He had been to SupraBurgh five times in all, each time with a view to setting up some kind of arrangement for Karnak. He had tried to identify the unnamed feelings it stirred up in him, but had always failed.

"It gives you an outside view of UnderMegapolis, as it were," he said, "but that soon fades once you return. Frankly I wouldn't advise anyone to make the trip."

"So it *does* change you?" Mettick asked.

"Well, it arouses peculiar sensations, like ideas that drift through your mind. As if you're resentful that—that we're living down here, subterranean, and can't get out, while they're . . ."

The other two looked at him in blank incomprehension, as if he had suddenly begun to speak gibberish.

"But it's just some sort of illusion, I guess," he resumed. "Some of the things you see in SupraBurgh would unnerve anyone. I saw an interstellar ship taking off once, just disappearing up and up into the blue sky without limit—" He broke off, attacked by sudden nausea.

"My God," said Mettick quietly.

"It was too much," Obsier said. "Luckily I had tranquilizers. I was under sedation for six hours."

There was an embarrassed silence at this description of foreign perversions. Karnak changed the subject.

"Well, you can forget all about that now. But I appreciate your sacrifices, I truly do. I wouldn't relish going up there myself. Now to more immediate matters. Our campaign for the use of ipse holo will probably turn out to be the most crucial issue of recent times. You and Mettick make a good team, especially where historical research is concerned. I'd like you to spend some time in the library."

"What are we supposed to be looking for?"

Karnak placed his hands flat on the desk top, his expression distant, slightly puzzled. "I just can't help feeling there's an angle on the syn bosses we could use. I've got an itch up here." He tapped his cranium. "The trouble is, I don't know what it is. Do you realize how hard it is to get close to the syn bosses data-wise?"

"They are shielded, naturally," Obsier admitted. "That makes sense. But there are the official biographies."

"Yes, detailed but . . . artificial, somehow. Business, business,

business. One long story of public service, private life coming off second best."

"It would be hard to sort out the man from the commercial empire in the jobs they are doing," Mettlick pointed out.

"True, boys, true. You know, I've spent hours studying their holocom talks. After a while I get the feel of their style. You know something? It's as if they've all been to the same school. There's something in their approach to spiel that's the same in each of them, despite their being such distinctive characters."

Obsier and Mettlick looked at one another. "Perhaps they've been coached by the same expert," Mettlick suggested.

"Except Schultz," Karnak added. "He's different. But of course he doesn't appear on holo nearly as much as the others. He rides in on Sinatra's ticket, everybody knows that. And his network is a subsidiary of Sinatra's, we know that too. As a matter of fact if I get on the magisterial council it's Schultz I expect to be replacing."

Obsier mulled it over but came up with nothing.

"Just give your imagination free play and browse around. Probably you won't come up with anything, but again you might." Karnak smiled ruefully. "We'll soon be in the thick of it. This is a mountain we're tackling, and it's as well to know all the slopes."

Cybration was the key to modern business. Cybration was the key to how UnderMegapolis was able to exist.

As the transit pod swept across the supercity advertising flashes swung by and receded like star systems undergoing doppler effect. They composed a cityscape of endless dimensions, internal hormones of the business world.

**RAFT ENTERPRISES ARE HERE TO SERVE YOU
EX-TYPE INTRACTIONS OFFER**

100% BIREFRINGENCE

WANT IT? STYLIC ACCESS HAS IT

Having researched the inane selling promotions of an earlier age, Obsier admired modern advertising for its muscular simplicity, its impression of underlying power and reliability. It was functional. It didn't insult the intelligence. Yet it was effective.

"May as well split into two departments," Mettlick was saying. "I'll research the personalities. You go into the technical side."

"Right."

The pod deposited them ten miles from Karnak's headquarters. Ahead of them was the towering frontage of the central library. Obsier left Mettick and went wandering through interminable sepulchral galleries. Eventually he settled down before a terminal in the Useful Hardware section. He ruminated; he had no lead, no idea of what he was looking for.

Idly, for the sake of making a move, he culled a subject.

"CYBRATION: The history of cybration goes back in a realistic sense to the year circa minus 780, when the first genuine cybrators were constructed. The name used for these early machines was 'computer', which was an accurate term since they were in fact little more than high-speed counters. Round about the year minus 700 the term cybration was coined to describe all types of automatic data processing both electronic and laseronic and covering computer, executive and andromatic modes.

"The modern business corporation is largely a cybrated system where personnel are used to fill particular positions requiring 'personalisation'. But for this method UnderMegalopolis could not exist, since the complexity of a modern society within a closed environment is beyond the capacity of an individual or group."

Pictures of early computers and later installations. The account continued, becoming increasingly technical. Obsier quickly lost interest. He culled another subject.

"IPSEIC HOLOCOM: The introduction of ipseic transmission must be admitted to be the last word in image reproduction at a distance, unless the waveform transmission of actual physical objects one day becomes possible. The first workable ipseic transmitting apparatus was tested in United Laserelec Laboratories (owned by the now defunct Megac RD Consolidated) in year 421.

"For a number of centuries it had been considered that the standard holo television system provided absolute perfection since it can reproduce images, with full colour and full parallax, that are indistinguishable from the original. United Laserelec drew attention to a deficiency, soon confirmed by psychological tests, that had long been overlooked: holocom, like earlier television systems before it, does not convey charisma. It is easy to ignore someone speaking on an ordinary holo stage, and no display of emotion or insistence on the part of the performer can force attention out of the viewer if he does not feel like giving it.

"It would be simple to attribute this lack to the viewer's

knowledge that the performer is not actually present and he is confronting only an insubstantial image. By means of careful experimentation United Laserelec destroyed this myth. Later it was discovered that 'presence'—the effect of 'being there' that one person has on another—is not a mental supposition but an actual, though subtle, force transmitted between people at short range. Further research showed that this force is radiated on a frequency of the order of 23 trillion trillion cycles per second. When a transmitter capable of adding this waveform to the normal holocom waveband was developed it was found that the transmitted image of a person carried the full force of his presence. It achieved *ipseity*: 'he himself'.

"Ipeic holocom has not come into general use. Although the modifications enabling an ordinary holo receiver to pick up ipseity are inexpensive—and in fact all holo sets are now so adapted—the cost of ipseity transmission is prohibitive. A number of transmitters are owned by the leading conglomerates of UnderMegapolis and are used for political purposes."

Mettick was on a different tack. He had before him the names and images of all six syn leaders—six heads of colossal business conglomerates. He had decided to investigate their family backgrounds.

Surprisingly, although their biographies detailed brief family histories in each case, these families were difficult to track down. Accordingly Mettick set the library unit he had been allotted to engage on lineal-and-likeness hunt.

This was on the third day of his somewhat aimless hit-and-miss tactics. Mettick sat back daydreaming as the unit hummed faintly. He dozed, and awoke with a start to find that the unit had been working for several hours.

There was a quiet clatter as a sheet slid out of the copy slot. Mettick picked it up and stared in bemusement.

A picture of Sinatra stared back at him. It was the same face he knew from many appearances on ipse holo—of them all, Sinatra was probably the most sedulous where his public image was concerned.

Beneath the picture there was a caption. "Frank Sinatra, years circa minus 790–740 (mid 20th Century, contemporary reckoning), singer and actor on 'cinema' (primitive image reproduction system)." There followed a list of dramas in which the long-dead actor had appeared. The library, apparently, had recordings of a few of them.

Mettick shook his head in wonderment. The library unit had found an individual, far back in history, of the same name as the syn boss—and of exactly the same appearance! It was all there: the smiling blue eyes, the wide-mouthed rubbery lean face, the mixture of candour and acuteness, the toughness within the geniality. It was an amazing resemblance, representing, presumably, a centuries-ago emergence of very strong family traits that were still active. Sinatra's ancestors *could* be traced, after all.

Mettick folded up the picture and put it in his pocket. Then he leaned toward the terminal and started work again.

Frank Sinatra was sitting relaxed and easy on an upright chair, leaning forward with arm resting on his knee. Life-size, he filled the holo stage and dominated the room with the force of his personality.

"There are some things we all know but which we should repeat to ourselves now and again because all of us can be absent-minded," he was saying to the family—the average healthy family like the millions of average families listening to Sinatra at this moment—who watched the holo stage. "Every so often there comes a time when somebody thinks it would be a good idea if the principles by which we've lived so long were to be laid aside to some degree. Well, it's not my decision, it's yours—the city's. But it needs thinking about. The freedoms and affluence we enjoy today didn't come about all at once, they needed the right system that evolved over a period of time."

Sinatra stopped speaking for a while, rubbed his jaw reflectively and then turned his warm, steady eyes back on his spellbound audience. "If this is beginning to sound like a sales pitch, then you're dead right, that's just what it is. It will be a sad day for UnderMegapolis if we ever lose sight of the principle of plutocratic democracy. It's given us everything we have and I believe it's the best system of government there is. It ensures that the men who rule have already proved their ability to administrate on a large scale, to serve the community and increase wealth by providing goods and services. It means efficiency, prowess and intelligence in the high offices of government. And UnderMegapolis proves it by voting in the biggest and most successful corporation heads, the captains of industry if you want to call it that, for term after term. Now it appears there are some people who want to subvert this principle. Not having what it takes to make it big by their own efforts, they

see the Magisterial Council as an easy way of getting to the top." Sadly Sinatra shook his head. "They just don't know what they'd be letting themselves in for. Running a supercity isn't easy, and it's no job for somebody who hasn't been through the whole school. The community would soon realize it too. But that won't happen, because the voters have too much sense. They realize what plutocratic democracy is for."

Suddenly a red light glowed to the left of the holo stage. A thrill of unbelieving excitement ran through the listening family. Sinatra was ready to take a question from *them*! This, they knew, was a regular part of the frequent talks and reports by the magisters, but in a population of a hundred million the chances had always seemed, well, *infinitesimal*.

Sinatra was gazing at the head of the family, waiting. The middle-aged man rose nervously. He could have pressed the "no question" button on the ipseity unit, but he now understood why almost no one ever did. It would have been an insult in so commanding a presence.

"I have a question, sir. Why not let the new candidate, Karnak, use ipse holo if he wants to? It doesn't mean we're going to vote for him, but I can't see any reason why he shouldn't."

Sinatra's eyes clouded over very, very slightly. "There isn't any reason why he shouldn't use it," he said. "Who's stopping him? But he's not much of a candidate if he wants it handed to him on plate. That's not how I got *my* equipment and I didn't go around asking for anyone else's, either."

The family head nodded. It made sense. A man ought to be able to stand on his own feet, especially if he was to help rule UnderMegapolis. But a half-frown remained on his face.

The dark shine of mahogany mutely reflected the six holo images who altercated agitatedly with one another. Raft took the lead, arguing in clipped, deadpan statements.

Sinatra, for once, seemed shaken. "I've changed my mind. Something's gotta be done. You know what ninety per cent of the questions I got tonight were? Why don't we put ipse holo at Karnak's disposal?"

"Nobody asked me that when I went on yesterday," Raft said.

Sinatra's face twisted sardonically. "You don't have a sympathetic manner."

"They'd have got a short answer if they had. The voters admire a guy who's tough but straight."

Cagney turned to look directly at Sinatra, his head tilted calculatingly. "What gives with this Karnak? What's the secret of his success?"

Sinatra raised two fingers placed together. "He's got *it*. Ipseity. Charisma."

"Huh-huh. He's got ipseity, yeah? So how's he going to put it over, huh? On ipse holo, maybe?" Cagney chuckled.

"Come together, you guys!" Sinatra pleaded. "We can't afford this kind of situation. You never know how it might develop in future generations."

Lancaster clenched his fists and raised his face, lips drawn back over strong white teeth. He spoke in a low intense voice like a strong whisper. "I say when you are threatened, *strike!* We should kill, kill, *kill!*"

"No!" Sinatra yelled. "We agreed before: no assassinations."

"Say," Bogart said suddenly, looking sidewise at Schultz as if hit by a crafty inspiration. "What if this Karnak *did* become a magister? Schultz is the one who'd get pushed out, that's for sure. We can do without him. Karnak wouldn't last long anyhow."

"No!" Schultz protested hoarsely.

"Leave Schultz alone!" Sinatra said tensely. "He's my buddy." But he, too, looked at Schultz speculatively.

A shiver ran through the room and the holo images flickered and seemed about to melt into something indefinable.

"One sign of trouble and you're all falling apart," Raft said disgustedly. "Sometimes I think I'm in crummy company. If you're so worried let Karnak put himself on ipse. What does it matter? Let him take the consequences."

They all looked at one another, considering.

"Fact Number One: UnderMegapolis is run on personal charisma," said Mettick. "It's as real as the electricity in your holo set. I'll tell you something I've found out. The syn leaders all have onput recognition gates on their comlines. They won't let each other beam their images into their conglomerates for fear they'll subvert their managers by sheer charge of personality. That's how seriously they take each other."

"Isn't that overcautious?"

"Not at all. One of their tactics is to call a non-syn enterprise and start giving orders to the underlings. You'd be surprised how often those orders are obeyed."

A disturbing picture was forming in Obsier's mind of distrust

and conspiracy in the highest echelon. "Then how do they communicate with one another?"

"Only privately by direct face-to-face holo."

"When I'm with Karnak I feel confidence in him," Obsier said, "but then when I see one of the syn bosses on holo I don't feel so sure and I almost feel like giving up. Do you think Karnak has enough personal charge?"

"Only one person in a million has as much, but honestly I don't know. I keep trying to imagine how he'd make out in a confrontation with Lancaster, say, or Raft. Those people have so much of it it's frightening—almost unnatural. In supercity terms, of course, possession of the ipseity apparatus gives them a monopoly."

"Not any more. Haven't you heard? The syn has relented. Karnak is going on ipse holo tonight."

Mettick's quest for a believable human profile to the syn bosses had led him into labyrinths of the library that had been unpaced for decades. He walked through dusty low-vaulted galleries past rows of disused terminal units, each giving access to some obscure facet of the past. He knew the answer was here somewhere. The facts he had discovered so far were too puzzling, too extraordinary, not to have an answer.

There had been some fascinating sidelines, too, in his search into the past. Even as far back as the minus eighth century there seemed to have been some sort of premonition of more modern history. Mettick had found references to "the withering away of the state" and "the abolition of central authority" that was supposed to come about in the future. He wondered how the ancients could have guessed about the fate of the empty government levels that separated UnderMegapolis from Supra-Burgh.

An age-old silence enveloped him. The nearest girl librarian was at least half a mile away, in the better-frequented upper floors. Mettick consulted some reference numbers on a list he carried and keyed on one of the terminal units. An ancient "cinema" comedy began to unreel, fascinating him with its extraordinary grimaces and quite ugly songs. He abandoned the unit after a couple of minutes and wandered on.

He entered a side passage where the lighting, for some unknown reason, was dimmer. To his amazement the material of the walls gave way to stone and wood in archaic, rotting panels.

And while he stood there one of those panels gave a little squeak and swung open.

Behind it was a flat glass screen with a picture on it. Met-tick had difficulty in recognizing the image at first: it was not in holo but flat. There was something else wrong with it, too: it was made up, unnaturally, of only two colours, white and greyish black in various tones.

The picture had a graininess that, peering closer, he saw resulted from its being composed of hundreds of parallel horizontal lines. But, when he finally recognized what it was, he jumped back in shock.

It was the face of Magister Dutch Schultz.

He began to tremble and then calmed himself as he realized that the picture carried no charismatic charge. The screen was some unbelievably primitive kind of television which could not possibly convey ipseity. God knew how old it was—it was a wonder it was still functioning.

"Hello, citizen," Schultz said in a husky voice. "So you're tryin' to find out the truth? Okay, I'll tell you the truth . . ."

Karnak strode into the transmitting studios feeling ten feet tall. This was to be his night. By the pressure of democracy—*pure* democracy, not the plutocratic variety—the magisters had been forced to concede an elementary right.

The studio producers were deferential. He waited in a cool blue chamber while the announcements were made. Then he was ushered into the transmitting cubicle. In front of him was the holo camera. Around him were the sensors that, with a faint hum, began to pick up his ipseity emanations at a frequency of 23 trillion trillion per second and feed them through the comlines . . .

The producer signalled to him through the side of the cubicle. He was on.

"Fellow citizens," he began, "tonight . . ."

And then the impressions began to hit him. It was merely like a tidal wave at first and he was able to ride with it. But in the next few seconds it became stronger. Millions upon millions of scenes, tens of millions of human consciousnesses, were forcing themselves into *his* consciousness, which like a balloon expanded, expanded, expanded—

And burst.

Sinatra had cornered Schultz in a small, narrow room with drab brown walls. It had no furniture, no means of escape.

"You goddam stool pigeon," Sinatra raged. "You ratted on us all."

"Whaddya want me to do, Frank?" Schultz screamed in terror. "You were gonna bump me off. I could see it coming." He had run and run and fought for his life, but now there was nowhere left to go.

"I put you on the council," Sinatra said, "and if I want it's my right to take you off or do what the hell I like with you."

"No, Frank, no!"

Sinatra leaped at Schultz. His fists smashed into him again and again, throwing him cowering to the floor. Then he attacked him with a crowbar that appeared in his hand, bringing the weapon down in three savage strokes. Soon there was blood everywhere.

Mettick burst into campaign headquarters looking desperate. "Get hold of Karnak," he demanded. "Don't let him go on ipse."

Obsier looked up tiredly. "Why?" he said mildly. "Actually you're too late. Karnak was taken ill at the start of the programme. We're waiting for news now."

Mettick sank down on to a chair. "He's dead, isn't he?"

"Should he be?" Obsier stared at him perplexed. "I hear he's in a coma. We're waiting for the doctor's report."

"He'll be dead," Mettlick said in despair.

Suddenly Obsier became alert, matter-of-fact. "Tell me what you found out," he said rapidly.

"Two things, chiefly." Mettlick fished in his pocket and came out with a sheaf of pictures. "Take a look at these. They're portraits of world-famous actors living about a thousand years ago. They were known colloquially as 'Hollywood stars'. Notice the resemblance?"

Obsier leafed through them. He saw the familiar, compelling faces of the Magisters of UnderMegapolis, captioned with their names. Burt Lancaster, James Cagney, Humphrey Bogart, and so on. Some were wearing characteristic expressions; others were in strange, surprising poses. Lancaster had his head tilted, favouring the viewer with a most uncharacteristic glossy smile.

"Absolutely incredible!" he exclaimed. "What is it? Some fantastic coincidence of genetic reconstitution? Or—" His voice

sank. "Oh no." Unwelcome, irrepressible thoughts were going through his brain.

"You've guessed it." Mettick pushed away the pictures and slumped down in his chair. "The change must have come fairly recently, certainly within the last hundred years. The cybration of big business reached a point where human beings were eliminated at the top. The cybration system became the actual, effective owner of capital."

"Without anyone knowing?"

"Why not? It was so complicated, data processing gives such opportunities for mystery . . . Besides, it only happened with the five biggest conglomerates—no, six, counting Reagan. Remember him? Each of these conglomerates became the property of a single mass of automatic data processing. Much cleverer, much more efficient than a human being."

"Yes, but why? . . ."

"Don't you see it? There was still the problem of the interface, to use a piece of cybration jargon. The cybrators needed *personae* so as to be able to deal with human beings and to help them find their bearings in a human world. So they went back through history looking for the most charismatic personalities they could find, the ones with greatest mass appeal. There must have been other considerations, too. I mean, the cybrators must have had some kind of affinity—anyway, they found them among the cinema stars of the minus eighth century. And they reconstructed those personalities in their data banks. Totally. You couldn't call those *personae* puppets by now. The identification must be complete."

"So we're ruled by ghosts," Obsier said woodenly.

"Yes. Or eighth century Hollywood film stars. Whichever you prefer."

"But on ipse holo they come over . . . they're *real*."

"So what? They generate the ipseity just as they build up a *persona*. That's why they have so much of it. More, probably, than the original film stars had."

"How did you find out all this?"

"Schultz told me. He got in touch with me in the library. He's the odd one out, by the way—he never was a film star but a genuine gangster, the type that the actors were supposed to portray. That's why there are no good pictures of him." He touched a blurred photo of a heavy, indistinct face. "He wasn't in the original set. Sinatra created him for convenience, to look after some subsidiaries and give him added weight on the council. That's why he chose a real gangster, I guess: it amused

him somehow. But something went wrong. Schultz has developed in his own direction, has become separated from Sinatra and wants to break away from him. He tried to do a deal with me; said he'd help me break open the syn. And he told me—" Mettick slammed his fist on the desk. "But too late!"

"Told you what?" Obsier pressed anxiously, leaning forward.

"About ipse holo! The real reason why it's never used, except by the syn. It's a killer!"

"What are you talking about?" Obsier stared at him.

"Ipseity transmission is a reciprocal process. It can't work one way. The sender becomes aware of the receiver, too. When you're broadcasting to millions of people they not only become aware of *your* presence, but you at the same time receive the presence of all those millions. The consciousness can't take it. It overloads."

Noting the other's expression, Mettick continued:

"That datum has been removed from the library. Everybody thinks it's just expensive."

"But the syn bosses. They don't—"

"They're not alive!" cut in Mettick savagely. "They're what you said, ghosts animated by electricity. You know that 'question time' technique they use on ipse holo? I learned today they handle thousands of questions at the same time, calculated on a scatter pattern so nobody ever suspects anything."

They sat silently for a full minute. Finally Obsier forced his brain into motion again.

"Maybe this is the beginning of something new after all," he said. "If Schultz really is going to help break the syn, it will all have been worth it."

"I don't think there's any hope there. Schultz can't be too bright, or he wouldn't have left it so late to warn me. And remember, he's really part of Sinatra. He'll never be able to hide what he's done. I imagine the Schultz persona has been washed right down the drain by now."

"And where does that leave us? We're the ones who know."

"We're in a spot. It's no good thinking anybody can fight the syndicate. They've got the means to power nobody else can use: ipseic holocom. We could go into hiding but they'd always be able to find us. We might be able to flee to SupraBurgh but—" He shuddered.

"I can't face SupraBurgh," said Obsier definitely, thinking of the obscene sight of a starship riding up into the endless blue.

"No, me neither. And that's something else we have to thank them for—"

The desk holo chimed behind Obsier. He turned, spoke quietly to it, then turned back to Mettick.

"Karnak's dead."

"The syndicate murdered him by his own hand."

"Yes," said Obsier sombrely. "What was that you were saying just now? About SupraBurgh?"

"There's one thing that obsesses the syn. The stars. They have a psychotic resentment about them. Remember Reagan? They wiped him out, too. He was the last one to try to make a bid for the stars, which was what he was doing when he tried to extend into SupraBurgh. But he couldn't make it and they know they can never make it either. They're machines, imprisoned down here and keyed into this subterranean super-city. So they hate the stars and the open sky. And that's why, over the generations, they've conditioned us to hate them too."

SCHOLIA, SEASONED WITH CRABS, BLISH IS

JOHN CLUTE

Stately, anfractuous James Blish comes down from Fabers, bearing a bowl of scholium on which two novels and a best sf of him lie crossed. Lyly's *Geology*, euphuistic sod, is sustained gently behind him by the mild ignorant readership. He holds the bowl aloft and intones:

—The world's my *Ostrea edulis*.

Then closing the preface to his *Best Science Fiction Stories (Revised Edition)* with a sigh, down the dark winding stairs he comes to us with gifts, this grim scholar, fearful jesuit, reaper of Joyce and biology, Strowger genre switcher (listen for the clunk), misogynist qua texts, apocalypse lover with icy fingers, James Blish who devised the best template series science fiction had ever seen, the Okie stories, and then ruined it, James Blish who now writes the worst, *Star Trek*, and will not stop, James Blish, through whose corpus, as through a moraine, granite and guck interpenetrate cackling beneath the full moon, each new book a spastic *pinata* spewing delirious botched crab-apples forth, inedible cranky mutant gets, but then granite too, the death of God in *Black Easter*, John Amalfi's "slogging brutal tireless heart", the masked Menippean discourse kicking off *A Case of Conscience*, the Kodiak bear terminating *The Warriors of Day* with a sudden salutary perspective transform, so that in dealing with this most uneven of all major

writers of science fiction one never quite knows what to expect next in the dark, quicksand or a bed of nails.

The books on hand—Faber's three, *Best Science Fiction Stories*, *The Day After Judgement*, *And All the Stars a Stage*, a bag sufficiently mixed to be sold only on prescription; plus *Midsummer Century*, a 35,000-word story optimistically bound by Doubleday between hard covers nearly as thick as the text and including a list of Blish's publications nearly as long, all for \$4.95; and a Penguin release of the superb *Black Easter* from 1968—all go a long way to increase the confusion in breast and head, and the job of dissevering joy from glop. But there is always a silver lining. Difficulties of gist apprehension, and general fibrillation of the affect, are not in this case intensified by any delirium parataxis from the pen of Donald A. Wollheim as he wields it with his thumb throughout *The Universe Makers*, that inimitable fan's vade mecum for the sniffing out of security risks ("The New Wave represents a departure from the science fiction directives for mankind") and for the identification of echt-sf on the high road of "Future Predictions" ("that framework of millions of years to come"), through his expedient refusal to mention James Blish at all. Blish leans to dystopic versions of the future, to rebarbative excursions into moral philosophy, and to apocalypses both frigid and terminal; Wollheim ("Humanity, whatever its faults, is the best darned thing going and will never be pinned to the mat") does not. Perhaps it is for that reason that the raven of DAW has excluded, from his conspectus of the *mind-boggling futures* science fiction is directing us into, any reference to the works of James Blish, inventor of the spindizzy, and flying cities, and consequent models of galactic commerce, and pantropy seeding the spread stars. Certainly it is the case that Mr Wollheim trucks little with moral ambiguities and shades of 20th cent grey (copyright pending), for, as he says, in his own words:

Good lives!

What does it mean when a thirst for novels wherein unmistakable heroes fight against unmistakable villains continues to show itself in fantasy writings . . . ?

It means that there is hope for humanity and hope for youth. For it means that hundreds of thousands—possibly millions—of young intelligent people are not basically cynics and victims of despair. It means that the ancient belief in the rightness of innate Good—that belief which sustained all the armies of prehistory whose battles laid

the foundations for all that we call civilization and culture—has not died from the human spirit. Youth recognized it when it came to them in its ancient pure form and rallied to it.

Let the New Wave sneer and snarl and cry that science fiction is dead and its vision of galactic futures dead; let them present their writings of despair filled with shock words and shock concepts; they have been defeated already by the cry *Frodo Lives!*

Some critics—possibly James Blish himself—might discover objections to this remarkable reading of the social consequences of pretending to believe in Frodo buttons, and might interpret the extraordinary popularity of *The Lord of the Rings*, whose author in any case explicitly repudiated any attempt to allegorize his romance, as a sign not of moral rearmament but of its reverse, not “belief in the rightness of innate Good” but “shock words and shock concepts” and a growing sense, not solely ecological, that we are the toilet we shit in.

The dejuiced angsty nostalgia for icons that so clearly riddles Frodomania—they might argue—bears a signifying relation to the post-industrial quietism currently infusing modern youth’s bosom with repressively-desublimated orexis rot, and the same signification applies to those weenybopper theosophies more recently woven, with dank cabbalistic bootlicking and Art Nouveau cartoons, around the sword and sorcery fantasies of Michael Moorcock, for which he must take some blame, as he does not stop writing them, and has in consequence become a purple sage. In their easy desolateness these fantasies represent—one supposes—a *Star Trek* of the inscape, and in their firm bleached contours and carious irreality they provide decals galore for icon-building; nor, in a world that feels the need for forms of belief, but has generally lost the innocence to believe in the forms of belief, should that accomplishment be counted negligible, just maybe a touch chilling. . . .

Icon-wise, as we shall see, James Blish has a brown thumb, nor is he cheerful, so it is no more surprising to note his failure to build a consistent version of himself for the field to chew on, like Heinlein’s, than it is to recollect his exclusion from former Ace kingpin Wollheim’s shortlist of future-builders of good faith, which includes guys like Mark S. Geston, and Alexei Panshin, and Dean R. Koontz, and A. Bertram Chandler, and Andre Norton (gal).

Even a selective glance at Blish’s oeuvre, none of which ever

appeared in Ace Books, demonstrates a formidable yet strangely ill-at-ease range and industry and craft: take *The Warriors of Day* (1951), for instance, or *Jack of Eagles* (1952), both impregnated with pulp but natty; or *Cities in Flight* (1950–1962), inside the avoirdupois of which a template saga begs to be let out, pace Spengler, as English readers will at last be able to confirm (or deny) for a small sum early in 1974, when Arrow Books will be publishing the whole sequence in paperback. Speaking of templates (Blish's own term, by the way), Arrow will also be releasing later this year the first three or four volumes of the Dumarest series, E. C. Tubb's fine, modest, rounded, professional quest-for-lost-Earth sequence.

Or take *A Case of Conscience* (1953–1958), the embedded tone- and affect-clarity of whose initial discourse strikes—suggestively—a note of fitness of means to intent lacking elsewhere in the list; or *The Seedling Stars* (stories assembled in 1957), in which pantropy and a sketchy galactic colonization model get too brief a run but live beyond their text.

Or take *VOR* (1949–1958), a misshapen effort, as Damon Knight has shown, a monster story whose peculiarly disgruntled and—as it were—*low-budget* adherence to the sidelines of the action nicely illuminates a seedier aspect of genre sequence construction. One might call it the *metonymy con*, and refer to its frequent appearance in B movies, where budgetary nightmares like car crashes or the end of the world demand avoidance gambits in which a rhetoric of personalized response and simplified gesture will substitute for any attempt at rendering the complex (or expensive) action. It all results in a miniaturized, claustrophobic, sideline, papier-maché world, whose protagonists invariably and very oddly seem half-blinded by flashbulbs, nor are there shadows. A typical shot sequence would be triadic. First (after the quarrel) there would be a quick scared look of outward regard, preferably the hero's, optionally followed by a nerve-shatteringly swift eyeline shot of a Dinky Toy totalling against a twig, and concluded by three lollygagging minutes of con that comprise the heart of the avoidance gambit—an interminable reaction shot synecdoche in which the heroine, leaning against a cardboard tree, nags the protagonist with a shrill, contemptuously “feminine” monologue until we could all just scream. What do you *mean* Los Angeles is doomed, Harry, what do you *mean* it's the end of the world. Don't be ridiculous, Harry, my father, Senator Higginbotham, your father-in-law, a man who has the ear of the President of the United States, he told me there was nothing

to worry about, Harry, and *he* wouldn't lie. Harry, I *won't* go! This Hollywood misogyny—which James Blish has indulged in himself more than once, viz. Dee Hazleton—neatly conforms to another conveniently low-budget conceit—which Mr Blish has also made use of, viz. *They Shall Have Stars*—the idea that the audience somehow longs to identify with that generic humour known as the Most Ignorant Participant, who is usually female, and that it therefore welcomes any chance it gets to be told, at stupefying length, facts which, out of the entire cast, she and only she persists in failing to comprehend.

Or take *Titan's*—also listed as *Titans'—Daughter* (1952–1961), a book which seems misnamed wherever the apostrophe is placed, as the girl in question, though eight feet tall, and close friend to other, taller, better informed, more important Titans, can claim neither to be the story's protagonist nor the daughter of anyone at all large. More interestingly, however, *Titan's Daughter* is a bumpy, peremptory compendium of narrative dislocations and affect discords, a chilled and chilling demonstration of its author's characteristic impatience with that mimesis of temporal continuity and beingness even sf generic tropes call for, if a novel is intended, and not something else.

Then take *The Star Dwellers* (1961), one of those horrifying juveniles whose protagonist (some kind of cadet) saves Terra, and everyone who lives thereon, through being *liked* by some alien or other sitting in judgment on us all. This one additionally features a saucy teenage girl reporter who, like Good Fellowship in a morality, pops in and out of sight *just as though* she were fulfilling an exemplary function—but the story has no thesis she can illustrate, and the action unfolds as though she were not present. There is a lesson to be learned from this.

Or take *The Night Shapes* (1962), a parody, perhaps not quite sufficiently affectionate, though admirably deadpan, of Haggard Burroughs and Co's melodramatic African wetdreams of Armed Innocence turned loose to wreak vengeance on all cowardly natives, venomous beasts, craven Arabs and ravishing Princesses whose inner corruption and staple diet, dilled testicle, clues one in to the fact that each and every one of them, natives, beasts, foreigners and self-assertive women, functions in the text as an *earth*, and in this way whitewashes "Tarzan's" otherwise inadmissible Id. In all of this an uglier form of metonymy holds sway, that form of the con otherwise defined as scapegoating. Philip José Farmer has even more cogently handled the wetdream of the omnipotent Id by making

his Tarzan literally all penis, penis dentata, though it must be admitted that Mr Farmer gives off rather too convincing an appearance of conviction, while Mr Blish certainly does not. I read *The Night Shapes*, incidentally, as a parallel worlds novel, feeling pretty ingenious as I did, and basing my analysis on certain "errors" that proliferated through the first pages of the text. Lyly, author of *Euphues* (1578), was presented as the author of the "newly-published *Elements of Geology*", while in this world its author was Sir Charles Lyell, its title *Principles of Geology*, and its date of publication a generation or two prior to the time of the novel, which I took to be around 1904-05. And H. Rider Haggard, nearly fifty in 1904, was referred to as "young Haggard," which also seemed otherworldly enough, even led tentatively to an Afrikaans hypothesis . . . But all in vain. Mr Blish has since indicated (personal conversation, 27 January 1973) that the subtle distortions and hints I had nosed out were nothing more than author's slips, or typos, or printer's errors; the parody was this-worldly. Exegesis bit the dust of consensual London.

Or take any of the books ostensibly on review.

Take the vast faux-naïf ungainly array of generic conventions their author lays on and yanks off, or the affect shambles he so often creates with an arbitrary curtain or an icy, stiff-kneed dismissal (like Chris deFord's in *Earthman, Come Home*), or the abiding sense of unease created in the reader by each book's determined avoidance of narrative equipoise, and a unifying conclusion will slowly force itself into view: that we have been traducing intelligent, scholarly, didactic James Blish by considering him a writer of novels at all, nor should that realization read as pejorative.

Blinkered by a claptrap procrustean vocabulary, and tactically constrained by a Germanic obsession with anything triune, literary critics have for centuries tended to define all prose fictions as novels, and to derive further generic classifications (like angelic hosts) from that initial act of idiot subsumption, so that we have learned to speak (and think) of realistic novels, and autobiographical novels, and science fiction novels, and fantasy novels, and satirical novels, and utopian novels, and so on, re-enacting the primordial fiat like mad cookycutters, and picking our teeth clean of a lot of mangled Bunyan and Swift and Peacock and Huxley and—right—James Blish as we proceeded, too. That this will no longer do I am not precisely the first to note, nor has the triune hypostasy (lyric—epic—dramatic) only recently become a

matter for ribaldry, and so I claim no originality for the impressionistic hints that follow, some of which are based on an attempt to comprehend Northrop Frye, and all of which are pale suns.

In his *Beyond Genre*, Paul Hernadi discusses Ramon Fernandez's 1926 division of prose fiction into two broad tonalities or aspects. At one pole, the *roman* concerns itself with "the representation of events as they emerge and develop in time". Its "intuitive," "synthetic," "vital" tonality evokes a "'psychological present' (which has nothing to do with the grammatical tense of a text)". Clearly, then, the *roman* idiom is instinct with mimesis. At the other pole, the *recit* concerns itself with "the presentation of past events by a narrator in accordance with the principles of logic and rhetoric". Its "logical" and "analytical" tonality reports a "conceptualized *temps*", which has nothing to do with tense either, but which gives off a sense of distanced, disjunct pastness. And just as clearly, the *recit* idiom is instinct with exemplification.

Avoiding category errors like the plague (because the *roman-recit* polarity is tonal not formal, and because we have been taught to be neat), we can still see that the traditional novel, as hypostasized by the triune hierophants, is in fact a *roman*—warm, plastic, representational, seamless, lacking any coarse "holes" in the fabric of time", as Dr Hernadi goes on to say—and that fictions in the *recit* idiom—chilly, didactic, presentational, disjunctive, full of arbitrary lacunae in the quilt of space—will be read as deficient *romans*, and assigned to the charnel where Procrustes dumps his legs.

Most of our great novelists have written in the *roman* tradition, it is true, though their fictions bear rather less structural resemblance to each other than one might have guessed from the rubric they bear in common. Fielding, or Richardson, or Smollett, but not Sterne, or Dickens, but not Meredith, can be so read without much discomfort. Nearing our own century, however, the identification of "novel" and *roman* gets more and more ludicrous, and becomes a formula for the writing of midcult kitsch most serious authors simply fail to heed—cf. Joyce, or Mann, or Proust, but not Maugham, or Faulkner, but not dear Saul Bellow. Still further on, taking a fiction the old vocabulary simply flenses, Nabokov's *Pale Fire* is a "novel" whose tonal idiom might well be rendered as genuine *recit* pretending to be fake *recit* pretending to be closet *roman*.

And back with James Blish, we're able to dissolve some of the knots and crabbed access he offers to the field through the

realization that, as a writer, he is deeply immersed in the *recit* idiom, maugre science fiction's general devotion to a shrill, streamlined mimetic parlance. As his fictions are radically deficient by *roman* canons, their fitness to a less popular idiom seems genuinely redemptive . . . Blish's incapacity at shaping a mimesis of time's present tense in the work, his compulsively frigid vetoing of any of his characters' movements towards intersubjectivity or joy, both transform themselves—in this new reading—into valid assays at a different task, the exemplification of dystopic topoi dear to the *recit* mind, like Voltaire's or Swift's, the pointing of a lesson through exemplary catastrophes, exemplary discourse, through exemplary characters and diction and mise en scene—though we're still left with the job of formally defining the fictions through which these dystopias are rendered, because certainly we cannot go on calling them novels.

In the Fourth Essay of his *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye divides prose fictions into four categories: the novel, which began in the eighteenth century and continued into ours, though now dead, and from which most *great traditions* select their mash; the romance, whose "stylized" protagonists "expand into psychological archetypes", and which "often radiates a glow of subjective intensity that the novel lacks", so that there should be no doubt where most science fiction slots in; the confession, which includes autobiographies, but also that "introverted" and "intellectualized" form of fiction concerned with integrating a life and the thoughts that make it "worth writing about"; and the Menippean satire, which James Blish does not always write, but possibly always wants to,

"The Menippean satire," says Professor Frye, "deals less with people as such than with mental attitudes. Pedants, bigots, cranks . . . rapacious and incompetent professional men of all kinds, are handled in terms of their occupational approach to life as distinct from their social behaviour. The Menippean satire thus resembles the confession in its ability to handle abstract ideas and theories, and differs from the novel in its characterization, which is stylized rather than naturalistic, and presents people as mouthpieces of the ideas they represent. . . . At its most concentrated (it) presents us with a vision of the world in terms of a single intellectual pattern. The intellectual structure built up from the story makes for violent dislocations in the customary logic of narrative, though

the appearance of carelessness that results reflects only the carelessness of the reader or his tendency to judge by a novel-centered conception of fiction."

"Menippean satire" is language that treats its exempla as they treat the world. Out there—in the world—a term less obscurantist and less burdened with tonal pointing might seem preferable, like "dissection" for instance, or "icicle", though within the confines of his essay Professor Frye does make his structuring intent perfectly clear, and goes on to tell us that "The Menippean adventure story may . . . be pure fantasy, as it is in the literary fairy tale. The Alice books are perfect Menippean satires. . . ."

So—as varyingly for Swift, Thomas Love Peacock, the last things of Wells, for Aldous Huxley, Wyndham Lewis, John Barth, David Stacton, Thomas M. Disch and John T. Sladek—tonal and formal distinctions fuse neatly into a cage for James Blish, whose *recit* mind longs for a cold bath of Menippus to shape its grasp, or so we're claiming. Unfortunately Mr Blish has immersed himself in a field—science fiction—whose generic forms cater to the heated iconicity of the romance, as stripped down for action, and his whole crabby yawing corpus demonstrates the costs of writing against the grain.

A further minatory scouring of the serried cross-grained ranks might, therefore, seem a touch gratuitous, though the cage or model does cast a few broad heuristic shafts of light. Blish's enormous distance, as implied narrator, from the exemplary worlds or dissertations he creates, does come clearer; as does the scholarly brambling of his texts with spinoffs of scholia introduced as their own ends; as does his apparent need to create evolutionary sequences rather than template (exemplary rather than fluvial—not temporal rather than static), which cost *Cities in Flight* its nous, and which segues into a love of the admonitory catastrophe; as does his revealing attempts to subsume disparate texts under post facto rubrics (cf. *After Such Knowledge*); as does his gloom, which is not inhumane, but which is not—a quality Kenneth Rexroth anyway ascribes only to the very greatest flowerings of the novel tradition—magnanimous, either; as does the false innocence that permeates his fictions, as it permeates the works of all *recit* authors, and which abides in the realization that thematically naïve topoi are being required—disingenuously—to illustrate far more than they could possibly *mean* to; and finally

the nature of our assent to his successful fictions (like *A Case of Conscience*) does come clearer, for it is an assent to equi-poise of assertion not narrative, conveyed through structures in space, not time, and recollected as models, not habitations.

As a Menippean illustration of the hypothesis that black magic literally works, *Black Easter*, one of the newer items, might seem to bode a touch musty, but in the event the emperor is dressed. Characters and plot are so closely and economically bound to their task of demonstration, and the narrative is so elegantly short, that there is a kind of paronomasia—a kind of “blessedness”—and a dystopic thesis laves us in the clothes of *fleuve*.

Its sequel, *The Day After Judgement* (1970; 1972 in England), is a disjointed, cack-handed anticlimax, and defrissons the death of God in *Black Easter* by allowing that He might only be on vacation and by putting Satan on His throne pro tem, because Nature abhors a vacuum—which makes it the *real* shaggy God story. In its use of metonymy cons both of character and of narrative it's as miniaturizingly evasive as *VOR*; in its generic chuntering about it's as loopy as *Titan's Daughter*; and in the *Malleus Maleficarum* misogyny it shares with its predecessor it is thoroughly egregious.

And All the Stars a Stage (1960–1972), a grimly jumbled mélange, starts off as a juvenile and closes, to coin a term, as a *senile*. For a while it's a matriarchal dystopia (what else); then it becomes an end of the world story, whose protagonists escape into space, leaving behind them the inevitable panicked mobs; then it's a quest for a new home through the vast reaches of the galaxy story, during which (to validate the title) there is an occasional querulous glimpse of a cardboard star, and during which the heroes visit various strange planets; finally it becomes an arrival at New Jerusalem or kiss the soil children story, rather neat though muffled by lack of space—the new home turns out to be Earth, and the genuinely best thing in the book is its superb closing sentence. Not for the first time in Blish's oeuvre, women composers are calumniated (page 99), and “simple male pride” (page 43) gets over its dystopia late in the book when Ailiss, once a female dominant (but now a wife), refuses to take over the ship when the clear duty to do so falls upon her; at the last moment her feminine intuition has recognized the natural order of things. “I will *not*,” she says, possibly in that *dangerously even* tone of voice so characteristic of Doris Day, “I will *not* be in command over my own husband—not at my age.” (Page 188.)

In *Midsummer Century* (1972) a man's mind is accidentally disembodied and cast far into the future where, linked to another discorporate intellect, it gets the chance to observe and comment on a variety of dying Earth dystopias, while time passes. In other words, Blish has structurally disjuncted his protagonist from the exempla of the text, and allied—affianced—him to the functions of the implied narrator, which seems so clarifying a demonstration of the hidden nature of the *recit* dissect, to try on still another label, that the book might well have been titled *The Eye of Menippus*. Although a clubfooted adventure plot does welsh on this version of a Garden, the storyline eventually wanders back off-stage and the calm, distant, rather melancholy pleasures return, literally embodying, in a sort of pun, what Darko Suvin calls “cognitive estrangement”, a term he seems to intend to use as a monothetic purge of science fiction as a whole, but which seems to work best as a modelling device for the closer description of the Menippean forms of the genre—and not of its dominant romance forms, because cognitive estrangement blights the icon.

And Frodo expires belike.

But our nostalgia (our need) for the steamy, high-pitched, kinetic fatefulness of iconicity persists, for genres work (human perception works) not only through metonymy, the substitution of part for whole, of set for omniscience, but also through the persistence of the image, time's body English. “Fatefulness,” says Erving Goffman in “Where the Action Is”, “involves a play of events that can be initiated and realized in a space and time small enough to be fully witnessed.” Icons are torsions in time, which heats them, and gives them pull through the work. Fate is mimed before us, in a matrix co-extensive with vision's. The dissect shrivels icon to juggle metonymy for the cold eye, hence James Blish draped in icicles; the romance swallows metonymy neat that icons may live, Frodo lives. Pray for light. The hero of romance subsumes metonymy (being rather dumb) and mimes fate's glow, time's fabric's meshing with the ganglia of the icons of our hot breath, and that is meet.

James Blish, *Black Easter* (1968; Penguin, 1972), 25p

James Blish, *The Day After Judgement* (Faber, 1972), £1.60

James Blish, *And All the Stars a Stage* (Faber, 1972), £1.90

James Blish, *Best Science Fiction Stories of James Blish* (Faber, 1973), £1.75

James Blish, *Midsummer Century* (Doubleday, 1972), \$4.95

Paul Hernadi, *Beyond Genre* (Cornell University Press, 1972)
Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton University Press, 1957)
Erving Goffman, *Interaction Ritual* (1967; Penguin University Books, 1972)

NIGHT- MARRIAGE

D. M. THOMAS

He went into his side, he dug that tunnel.

Hobbled out first, on two sticks, his mother in black.

Mother, he said, mother,
The past of which you are only a tenant,
A cloudshadow, the rough carn,
Spreads down over the terraced valleyside
My father kept perfect.
Let him who is now its owner
Look to it.

The tunnel unrolled like a surgical glove.
Pain squeezed him past pain.
He shouted to his wife:
Are you as dead as you seem?
It must be in our sleep we can converse
And make love even not like tarantulas
Or surely we could not endure our days.
I have come to discover how much of your future
I am going to let you live.

He risked a look back
As he reached the entrance.
The experiment had failed.
She was quite dead.
His eyes flinched. She withdrew into the earth.
It was the sun, he protested, the harsh sun!
But she was gone.

He resolved to be more radical.
He shouldered an axe,
And went down after her
Smashing at his days, minutes, years.
He grew younger.
Every time he stopped to rest,
The tree that had burdened his back
Shrank a little
And a river or a lake appeared.
He originated water.

He came to her swaddled body;
He smashed the axe into her,
Dismembering her.
Exhausted, he sank into his final sleep,
All the pieces lying round him on the ground.

Waking, remembering her, all the pieces had grown into
Perfect women. They tended his every want.

Eye-woman
Adjusted to him slowly, a lens. When she slept with him in
Without knowing it she woke in the morning ulcerous,
inflamed.

Ear-woman
Fled into an inner room. She could not keep her balance.

Head-hair-woman
Dragged him through her nerves.

Pubic-hair-woman
Melted into the woods whenever he came. He called and called
At her edge. Snow endlessly fell. No trace.

Cunt-woman
Applied him, a tampon. It was difficult to extricate.
She averted her eyes. There was too much blood.

Finger-woman
Worked herself to the bone to bring them off.

Thumb-woman
Lay dumbly on her side after he had made her, and squeezed.

Anus-woman

Was already old. Millions of years. She had lost her senses.
It was no use talking.

Most looked into a pool
And saw their double.
Faeces looked into faces.

How can we rid ourselves
Of all the others?
She conceived a plot
They confided in Anus-woman.

She went round to all the beds,
Squatted on the faces of the dreaming women,
And farted diseases into their open mouths.

He began to regret so many deaths.
Now you are Cunt-woman, he said.
I'm pressing my prick into Cunt-woman.
Now you are Pubic-hair-woman, he said,
I'm sucking Pubic-hair-woman's nipples.
Now you are Ear-woman, he said,
I'm jamming my mouth between her thighs,
We're sucking each other's brains out,
We're interlocked chinese nails.

She slipped away and slept with someone else,
And came back and told him about it.
He didn't know there were other men alive.
He shivered and burned with jealous joy.
Now he is pressing into my cunt, she said.
Now you are spreading wide your thighs for him, he said.
Let us drink to his fuck, she said.
He poured wine on hers and licked it up.
She poured spirits on his and sucked it off.
Now Tooth-woman is taking his spunk into her mouth, he said.
He said I want to fuck hell out of you, she said.
You said come on then fuck hell out of me, he said.
Yes, she said, now Tongue-woman is singing for him
The song you loved.

He parted her hair with his fingers. There was her fontanel.
Time passed.
He pressed his steel an inch into her skull.
She lopped his left arm off at the shoulder sheer,
He started to impale her.
A child was born.
She pruned him of his ears, his nose.
The grass was the red sea.
His blade travelled down through head and neck,
A long razor-nick.
She chopped off his legs at the groin.
A child was born.
He haled the steel up to her waist,
A livid stretchmark.
She slit off his eyelids, blinding.
He drew the steel down
Through her breasts' pass.
A child of a child was born.
She sliced off his genitals.
He made one last upthrust, as she severed the windpipe.
She folded apart.
He pitched forward into the space she had left.

Anus-woman hobbled in.
She wept bitterly.
Nothing but a hole between time and eternity.

Their gobbets had turned black in the sun.
She milked his foreskin of a tear, and rubbed a spot
On each of her slices and on his trunk.
She covered them in leaves and walked away.
Returning, there stood the man and two perfect women,
Black, shining. She rejoiced.

Anus-woman gave him a pack of cards on his birthday.
She thought the four of them could play a nice game of whist.
Instead, he grew absorbed in a game of patience.
There was always one rogue black queen or other
But the rules he had invented
Didn't allow any discarding.
Yet he was obsessed with working it out.
It could go on till he died, he dreamed of that peace,

But sometimes he had the horrifying vision
Of playing the patience through all eternity.
But even this was nothing to the sheer horror
Of actually working it out.
The discard would cease to exist,
And he would have to shuffle, and start again.
Another mess you've brought on me, he said to Anus-woman.
She was too busy watching herself die, watching her faeces
Slide out of the world.

Andi Vaverusa lies sleeping.
Is it a sleep of health or of death?
Andi Vaverusa, you sink into his love,
You sink into his sleep.

Andi Senikumba was missing.
She had been missing for two days.
How perfect is love without her, Andi Vaverusa.
She sighed, I will be back in two days.

I weep for the imprint of my body.
I bend and kiss Fruit-of-the-Distant-Sleep.
I bend and kiss Flower-of-the-Tangled-Root.
They are not mine. They are their soul-children.

She wept that she could not fade into the trees.
I bend and kiss my nephew and my niece.
I will never blossom as the moon blossoms.
This soul is not mine. My sister steals my life.

I take out my paint and my finest dress.
I walk away over the plain, between the palmtrees where
Criminals are torn in two. I walk across the river.
Two children were playing there.

She goes over the plain. She passes the palmtrees. She
crosses the river.
There are playing in it two children.
Andi Vaverusa asks them, Did anyone pass here two days ago?
They answer her, Do you perhaps enquire after a beautiful
lady?

I turn aside from the path to where a coconut tree grows.
I open my paint basket,
I paint both my eyes black
And one cheek with spots.

She went on. Under the coconut tree she saw her sister's
open paint basket.

She painted one eye black, and both cheeks with spots.
She opened her coloured sash and tied it round her.
As she tied it she sneezed. Is this the day of her death?

I open and unfold my coloured dress,
I tie it tight round my waist.
As I tighten it I sneeze.
What does this portend? Is today the day of my death?

She turned to the coconut tree, and wetting her hands she
climbed it.

Half way between the leaves and the root
She paused and looked below her.
What did she see? The long tresses of Andi Senikumba.

I turn to the coconut tree.
Moistening my hands, I spring to climb it.
Half way between the leaves and the root
I pause and look round on the land, my mournful land.

For a while she remained looking over the land,
The mournful land, the strand where they had walked.
If my dear sister is dead
He will no longer love me alive.

I am the strong hand he cannot love himself with.
In the centre of the pool,
Where I am no longer strong,
He will love me only.

I am the weak hand he can only love himself with.
At the centre of the pool,
Where I am no longer weak,
He will find me at last.

I let go both my hands,
And my life is parted from me.
She let go with both hands, saying, Our lives are parted
from us both.
And their bodies lie together.

He was yet lonelier. Even Anus-woman had died.
One day an enormous snake slid past him.
He cut up its body into fifty pieces.
They turned into men with enormous erect penises.
They roamed the woods, bearing their own children.

One day he looked up into a tree
And saw a girl there, winking at him and smiling in the sun.
Even her cunt was winking at him and smiling in the sun.
He tried to climb, but his erection
Got in the way, and he slid down again
Leaving the tree-trunk smeared with semen.

Suddenly the foliage all around
Was full of faun-like faces and monstrous penises.
They swarmed through the tree-tops and fell upon the girl,
One by one raping her. Then they cut her into pieces.
The pieces slid down the trunk like giant snails.

Smeared with the semen, they dried in the sun.
Grew into girls, who vanished, chattering with laughter,
To mate with the fifty satyrs in the woods.

He shivered at the entrance. It was getting dark.
No-one had come out yet.
This time he would go himself.

ACCEPTING FOR WINKELMEYER

HARVEY JACOBS

Harry Parker pulled at his bow tie. It was a signal to stop the music. Harry Parker's face went *serious*. It was time for the business at hand.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," Harry Parker said, "let's all settle down. *Hey, that's what my mamma tells me to do. Settle down.* Seriously, our profession is here tonight to honor its own. Let's face it, folks, we live in a glamorous world. *At least you do.* But life is not all spotlights and tinsel. A lot of hard work done by the silent heroes of our industry, *our art*, goes into the moments of triumph we all enjoy . . . like tonight. And our first Awards of the evening go to these silent heroes, the scientists, the technicians, the nitty-gritty brigade who make it all work. Let's hear it for them, friends, the guys and gals in the background, the ants backstage who use their genius *to make us look like grownups.*"

Here the audience applauded. Barnaby Royce and Joanna Verkle came out to present the first Awards. They were new stars famous mostly for their work in television. Each had made only one film and neither was well reviewed or received. Introductions were needed.

"Barnaby Royce and Joanna Verkle," Harry Parker said.

"Well, Joanna," Barnaby said, "it's kind of strange to be here to present these Technical Awards. I can't even fix the kitchen sink."

"It sure is," said Joanna Verkle. "I had enough trouble just fixing my face in time to get to the theatre."

"Everybody's a comic," said Harry Parker. "And now, as my dentist says, *for the moment of tooth*. Read on, MacDuff."

"The first Awards of the evening are for technical achievements which have advanced the spectrum of the art."

"They sure are, Barnaby," said Joanna Verkle. "The envelope, please."

A uniformed guard handed an envelope to Harry Parker. He held it to the light, shrugged, and handed it to Barnaby Royce. Barnaby Royce opened it and handed its contents to Joanna Verkle.

"For the Synchronous Oscillator, William Crink."

The audience applauded as William Crink came for his Award.

"Thanks, all. Bless you," said William Crink.

"For the Recycling Ohminator," said Joanna Verkle in a sexy voice. The audience laughed. "Herman Monk."

"I think this is the climax of my career," said Herman Monk as he clutched his statue.

"For the . . . wow, this is a toughie, Diametrical Synso-graph," said Joanna Verkle.

"That is a toughie," Barnaby Royce said.

"*You should have tasted the steak I had for supper,*" said Harry Parker.

"The winner is Mark C. Pokriss."

Mark C. Pokriss tripped on the steps but got to the stage. He nodded and waved the Award. He bowed and left.

"And finally," said Joanna Verkle, "for the Tri-Deviated Automatic AC-DC Pulsator, Marvin Winkelmeyer."

"Accepting for Winkelmeyer," Barnaby Royce said, "Mr. Henry Fibber."

Henry Fibber, a thin stooped man in a tuxedo that made him look like the vice president of a funeral parlor, walked slowly to the stage. As he came toward Joanna Verkle and Barnaby Royce he cried. Tears cascaded from his eyes.

Henry Fibber paused to wipe his nose with a great white handkerchief. Then he advanced and the audience cheered. Such emotion in public was a rare thing to see.

Joanna Verkle smiled at Henry Fibber as he reached for Marvin Winkelmeyer's prize.

Barnaby Royce patted him on the back.

Harry Parker shook his head back and forth and said, "Lest we forget what this recognition means to those of our persuasion. I know I cry every night from the lack of it. *My doctor says I have Award deficiency.*"

"I would like to say a few words of gratitude," Henry Fibber said, "on behalf of my associate, Marvin Winkelmeyer, winner of this Award for his development of the Tri-Deviated Auto-

matic AC-DC Pulsator, which has been assigned Patent 7654442 by the United States Government."

The audience applauded wildly. Harry Parker did a mock buck and wing.

"You go ahead and say your few words," said Joanna Verkle. Henry Fibber bent toward the microphone.

"If Winkelmeyer was here today he would say thank you from the bottom of his heart. His heart. His great, beating, blood-thumping loving heart. Winkelmeyer's *heart*."

"That was splendid," Joanna Verkle said. The audience stomped and roared.

"*Right on*," said Harry Parker slapping Henry Fibber on the shoulder.

Henry Fibber did not move from his position at the microphone where he bent like a hospital drinking straw, legs together, arms at his sides, head leaning toward the electronic ball.

"I am not finished," he said. "I want you all to know that such honor, such world-wide praise, gives pride and pleasure not only to Winkelmeyer but to his entire family. Mother, father, two brothers, sister. They are all dead but if there is communication between the planes of existence, then they know what has happened here tonight."

"*Right on*," Harry Parker said again.

"Some believe the impulses of the mind linger and conquer death. Winkelmeyer believes that. He has convinced me."

"Mr. Fibber," Barnaby Royce said, "we've got to move along."

"I must add," Henry Fibber said, "that I, Winkelmeyer's roommate, feel enormous pride. Why? What is all this to me? I am no scientist. I am a clerk in a shoe store. A good clerk, yes. Boots, sandals, oxfords, galoshes. Yet I share in this glorious moment."

"Groovy," said Joanna Verkle. "Now . . ."

"So I accept this Award belonging to Marvin Winkelmeyer with reverence. Winkelmeyer, who is not here tonight. You must surely ask out of simple human curiosity why Marvin Winkelmeyer is not here himself. Why? After all it is the big night of his life. And his life does not have many big nights. No. He lives a secluded, pedestrian existence. A troubled life. He smokes, he swallows pills for his nerves. At night he often screams from dreams that snap like pincers. Many times I wake him gently. Many times I brew warm milk to comfort him. For

a man like that, not being here is much more than even being here. You see what I mean?"

"Mr. Fibber," Harry Parker said. "I'm sorry to ring the bell. But there's a long road to hoe. So let's take a bow and wrap it up and we're on our way."

"God only knows what Winkelmeyer would have said in my place. He is quite mad you see. Not in the ordinary sense. He would not cause harm. Just the opposite. But since the war, since the camp, his mind behaves even more wildly than the early models of his Tri-Deviated Automatic AC-DC Pulsator. He believes he is from another planet in another solar system. He really thinks that. They say it is because of the brutality he observed at Dachau. They say it was too much for him to assimilate. Not only the deeds he witnessed but the shame of his own survival. They say his brain produced his marvelous compromise. It took him off the Earth. It gave him back as a creature from elsewhere, observing, contributing, given the mission of moving humanity toward a golden age. Winkelmeyer is a lamb. To hear him tell it, his visit to our planet is an act of charity for which he volunteered. Like the Peace Corps. In all ways he is rational. Except for that obsession. He prays now to gods of time and space in a language of grunts and numbers. Weird, yes? See what I put up with?"

The television director signaled the orchestra to play. The cameras were taken off the stage. A commercial for panty-hose filled the monitors. Two guards came forward and flanked Henry Fibber.

"Just move along like a good fellow," Harry Parker said.

"No."

"Pretty please," said Joanna Verkle.

"I'm not done."

"Be reasonable . . ."

"I am reasonable."

"Guards."

The guards grabbed Henry Fibber and lifted him. The audience gasped. Henry Fibber put his mouth over the microphone and bit it. It kept the guards from pulling him away.

When the commercial was done, the cameras blinked back on. The director signaled Harry Parker to let things continue. The guards ran off stage. Henry Fibber released the wet microphone.

"Again I ask you why such a man with such a sense of mission is not here tonight. It is a vital question. Ha! One of

you in this distinguished audience knows part of the answer. I can see you out there at Table 8 Miss Linda Zupper. I see you with your exposed nipples and your hair twisted into a snake. I see you wearing the pin Marvin Winkelmeyer gave you."

"Linda Zupper?" said Joanna Verkle.

"I know her," Barnaby Royce said. "She's a script girl at International."

"Tell them all, Linda Zupper, why Marvin Winkelmeyer is without his platform."

Linda Zupper rose from her soft chair slowly yet quickly like a volcano leaving the sea.

"Son of a bitch Henry Fibber," she said.

"Son of a bitch Linda Zupper," said Henry Fibber.

"Damn you and damn Winkelmeyer."

"Easy for you to say. Damn Damn."

"Bug the both of you. Him with his wails about the sound of silkworms spinning. Silkworms. Winkelmeyer hears silkworms. Direct from mainland China. They keep him up at night."

"The silkworms are symbolic, idiot," Henry Fibber said. "They stand for the sensuous softly spinning cunning webby creatures who entwine the innocent."

"Innocent? Winkelmeyer and his cosmic harem. He boasted plenty to me about his weightless whores."

"Symbolic. Symbolic," Henry Fibber screamed. The microphone sent back a shriek. "Symbolic of the celestial conquests of the mind. Point after point, you missed them all. Winkelmeyer could have been talking to stone."

"Stone? You never called it stone, brother. Never not one time."

"Silence," Henry Fibber said, gesturing shame-shame with his index fingers.

"Silence? You told everybody. Store keepers. Strangers. You had to run and tell Winkelmeyer. Silence. That's good."

"We came to terms. He understood. He knew it was your need to possess everything. What chance did I have? Me, a nothing person. Winkelmeyer forgave me. He absolved me. He washed me clean."

"Get the hell off the stage," Linda Zupper said. "Nobody cares."

"Sparks fly," Harry Parker said. "It's the tension of the event."

"Thank you, Henry Fibber," Joanna Verkle said.

"Here, here," said Barnaby Royce.

"Give him back his pin," Henry Fibber said. "Do that at least. You know his feelings for that pin. His mother on her deathbed. . . ."

"His mother? He told me the Empress of the Galaxy. Take the goddamn pin."

Linda Zupper took a round-shaped bit of jewelry from her gown and hurled it at the stage. Through sheer chance it hurled clasp first. The sharp clasp lodged in Harry Parker's cheek. Henry Fibber grabbed at the golden mole. A dot of blood marked the spot. Joanna Verkle touched her script to it.

"Why did you involve yourself with Winkelmeyer? Why? He had a chance before."

"Why?" Linda Zupper said. "Ask Joe Hirshimer why."

"Joe Hershimer is the producer of 'Trial By Triumph' and other hits," said Harry Parker automatically.

"Indiscreet pig," said Joe Hirshimer from the balcony.

"Screw discreet," Linda Zupper said tilting her head back to find him.

"I told you to date Winkelmeyer. But to *do it* with him? And with his roommate? My god. My god."

"Date? You told me to *date* Winkelmeyer. Obsolete man. Who dates anymore? Name me a person."

"Scavenger," said Joe Hirshimer.

"Don't lower yourself," said Mrs. Hirshimer.

"Ginger Hirshimer, former Miss Tennessee," said Harry Parker. The audience applauded, Henry Fibber along with them.

"Lower himself?" Linda Zupper said. "He could stand at attention and talk to snakes. His problem isn't lowering himself, dearie, as you must surely know by now."

"Lollypop," said Mrs. Hirshimer.

"Don't talk to Linda like that," said Joe Hirshimer. "She's destructive, yes. But she is no lollypop."

"Agreed," Henry Fibber said. "She is a woman with all the feelings of a woman. A blessed woman. A woman with an inner warmth that leaps from her pores and says in a soft whisper 'come to me, come into me, rest in me'. All honey does not taste the same."

"Don't defend me," Linda Zupper said. "Who made you, F. Lee Bailey? And I don't need this neither. I'm leaving."

"Before you leave, princess," said Joe Hirshimer, "tell the boys and girls what you did with the little pictures of the blueprint for the Tri-Deviated Automatic mother grabber. Tell them how you got them out of the house."

"*I love a mystery*," Harry Parker said.

E. J. Huff, a huge man with a puff of pure white hair, jumped from his place beside the gorgeous Terry St. Croix. He climbed over people on his way toward Linda Zupper. In his hand he carried a flaming lighter covered with emeralds.

"E. J. Huff," Joanna Verkle said. "Winner of last year's Founder's Trophy for his fabulous contribution to just about everything."

"Get away," Linda Zupper said, dodging the butane flame. "If you want to cook somebody, cook Hirshimer. I never peeped about the Winkelmeyer blueprints."

"Ah. Ah. So," said Henry Fibber. "So that is how the clever Nipponese managed to produce a Tri-Deviated Automatic AC-DC Pulsator for ten dollars less and with a chrome handle. Linda, Linda. Take a man's soul. But his life work?"

"Shut your face," said Jack Harmon, of the firm of Harmon, Washington and Dean, which tabulated the results of the Academy balloting. E. J. Huff extinguished his lighter.

"Bastard client," Jack Harmon said. "Huff, when our auditors questioned that \$25,000 entry for photographic services you swore it was a contribution to the campaign of Seth Lucas. My firm will not be compromised by you or any like you. We renounce your account."

"Seth Lucas? E. J. Huff supporting a liberal?" said Harry Parker. "*He rides around in a car plastered with William Reegle stickers.*"

"What's wrong with Seth Lucas?" Mrs. Hirshimer said. "He's the most understanding responsive, cultured, hairy . . ."

"Dear . . ." said Joe Hirshimer.

"She's right," Joanna Verkle said. "Solid on target center."

"She sure is," said Barnaby Royce. "Face it."

"We're way off pace," Harry Parker said. "Mr. Fibber, I don't mind telling you . . ."

"Poor Winkelmeyer," Henry Fibber moaned. The room was silent. "Poor genius. Poor tormented shell. Your eyes have seen terror beyond terror. Your flesh has felt pain beyond pain. You have witnessed such things as to curdle your insides. You float in a celestial dream recoiled from Earth hanging in the black endless space of a universe created by your own brutalized mind. She came and heated the sport of your existence. You fried under her touch. And you worked, Winkelmeyer. I have never seen a man work like you. Gadgets great and small. Gadgets simple and complex. Items to open shoe laces with no bending and items to shake the hearts of giant computers.

Toys, engines, appliances, the Tri-Deviated AC-DC Pulsator, motors, elements, fusions, fissions, moving shapes of light and energy. And what did she want of you? A blueprint, no more. You offered her time and space, babies created out of sperms worth a fortune, every one, and she was content to deceive and nibble at the edges of your massive endowment. She slept with your roommate, she stole your plans, she took your pin. And you, Winkelmeyer, you went on writing your acceptance speech despite all that. Then she sent you cherries. Tainted cherries to keep you from here. I did not get so much as a box of sand from that slut. But at least my stomach is intact. I accept for you, Marvin Winkelmeyer, this earned and deserved accolade from your peers. I Henry Fibber who will be remembered as your roommate."

"A nice summary. That wraps it," said Harry Parker. "*Stay tuned for the midnight news.*"

"There will be no midnight news," Henry Fibber said. "Not tonight. No local, national and international catastrophies to comfort the dead. Winkelmeyer, I know you are watching. Excuse me, but vengeance is called for. I know your feelings about violence. I know you say you are only a traveler from a place where cotton would be called abrasive and all tongues taste of fresh strawberries. But I felt the need, Winkelmeyer, I felt the need. I borrowed your formula for the Inner-Intra Denominational Eviscerator Constant. Forgive me, Winkelmeyer. At least now you can return to what you call The Place Where with no worries for the likes of such as us. Go home, Winkelmeyer, with a clear mind. Leave this dung heap. In a minute this whole theatre will go up like a final fart and the rest along with it."

"Hold on," Harry Parker said. "Mr. Fibber, are you about to destroy the world?"

"Like that," Henry Fibber said.

"Before the main body of Awards?"

"Before."

"But we wait all year. All year."

"I realize that. I may not be in the profession but I know that much."

"But do you know *how* much?"

"I failed to realize?"

"You failed to realize."

"I could stop it. I could pull the Seminal Involutioner Decibal Modifier. That would delay things. I could call Winkel-

meyer. In fact, knowing him, the saint, he's probably in a cab right now."

"Don't just stand there," Harry Parker said.

"I'm not sure," Henry Fibber said. "I've committed myself before a global audience. It's not exactly the privacy of the home."

"What's the Best Picture this year?" Harry Parker said.

"Ulysses in Newark," said Henry Fibber.

"Are you sure?"

"No. I concede it could be *The Dream Eaters*."

"Aren't you curious?"

"Sure. Who isn't?" Henry Fibber said. "Even Winkelmeyer is curious. In an abstracted sort of way. Only this evening he lay in his bed cupping his hands in the shape of *her* bosom speculating on Best Picture."

"Then?" said Harry Parker.

"I need time to weigh alternatives," Henry Fibber said.

"There's plenty of time," said Harry Parker. "We're in a commercial break. Sit down on the stage. Have yourself a smoke. Think cool thoughts. If you want something, ask for it, please."

"Hold Winkelmeyer's statue," Henry Fibber said. "I like my hands free. I worry with my hands."

Harry Parker took the Award.

"Say, hey," said Harry Parker. "*I finally get to clutch at one of these beautiful babies. It feels good—oh so good—it do—it really and truly doodle-doodle-do.*"

THE BEAUTIFUL ONE

KEITH ROBERTS

For weeks now the heat had not abated. Day after day the hard sky pressed on the rounded chalk hills; the leaves of trees hung listless and dry, the growing grain yellowed, rivers and ruins shimmered with mirage. The nights were scarcely cooler. Men tossed and grumbled in the stockaded towns, dogs ran snapping and foam-flecked. At such times tempers are short; and the temper of the Horse Warriors was at its best an unsure thing.

Toward the end of one such baking day a column of waggons and riders rumbled steadily between hills of smooth brown grass. At the head of the cavalcade rode a troop of Warriors, their skins tawny, their beards and flowing hair dark. They carried bows and spears; and each man wore a skullcap of burnished steel. Behind them jolted an ornate siege engine, the tip of its throwing arm carved in the likeness of a great horse's head. More Warriors brought up the rear, driving a little rabble of wailing women. Clouds had thickened steadily through the day, trapping the heat even closer to the earth. Thunder boomed and grumbled overhead; from time to time men glanced up uneasily, or back to the skyline where showed the palisade and ruined watchtowers of a village. Flames licked them, bright in the gloom; a cloud of velvet smoke hung and stooped, drifting slowly to the south.

Behind the tailboard of the last wagon staggered half a dozen men. They were naked, or nearly so, and streaked with dust and blood. Their wrists were bound; ropes of plaited hide passed round their necks, tethering them to the vehicle. Two more wretches had given up the unequal struggle; the bodies towed limply, jolting over the ridges and boulders of the track.

Shouts from ahead brought the column to a halt. The pale dust swirled, settling impartially on men and horses alike; the

prisoners dropped to their knees, groaning and fumbling at the nooses. A group of men cantered down the line of waggons, reined. They were richly dressed in trows and tunics of figured silk; and each wore a mask of woven grass, fringed with heads of green barley. Their leader carried a gilded Staff of Power; on his chest, proudly blazoned, was the great spear of the Corn Lord.

He nodded now gravely to the Horseman at his side. "You have done well," he said. "The spoil of the first waggon, the grain and unbleached cloth, is forfeit to my God. Also one in ten of the draught animals, and what sheep and goats you drive in from the hills." He held his palms up, fingers spread. "The rest the God returns to you, to do with as you choose. This the Reborn ordered me to say; will it be pleasing to you?"

The other showed his teeth. "Cha'Ensil," he said, "it will be as your Mistress desires. The Horse Warriors too know how to be generous."

But the other had stiffened, eyes glittering through the mask. He said, "What have we here?"

The Horseman shrugged. "Prisoners, for the sacrifice," he said. He glanced at the lowering sky. "Our God becomes impatient when the nights are sultry," he said. "Have you not heard his hooves among the clouds?"

"I heard the Corn Lord chuckle in his sleep," said the priest crushingly. He pointed with the Staff. "Show this one to me," he said. "Lift his face."

The Warrior grunted, waving an arm. A man dismounted, walked to the prisoner. He twined his fingers in the matted hair, yanked. The priest drew his breath; then reached slowly to unlatch the mask. "Closer," he said. "Bring him here."

The victim was dragged forward. Cha'Ensil stared; then leaned to place strong fingers beneath the other's jaw. The cheekbones were high and delicately shaped, the nose tip-tilted and short. The green-grey eyes, glazed now with pain, were fringed with black. Blood had dried on muzzle and throat; the parted lips showed even white teeth.

A wait, while the oxen belched and grumbled, the horses jangled their bits. Then the priest turned. "He is little more than a child," he said. "He will not be pleasing to your God." He reached again to jerk at the leather noose. "The Corn Lord claims him," he said. "Put him in the waggon."

The Horseman glared, hand on his swordhilt, face flushed with anger, and Cha'Ensil raised the glittering Staff level with

his eyes. "This is the God's will," he said. "A little price to pay, for many blessings."

Another wait, while the other pulled at his beard. The priest he would have defied readily enough; but behind him stood One whose pleasure was not lightly to be incurred. The thunder grumbled again; and he shrugged and turned his horse. "Take him," he said sardonically, "since your God gains such pleasure from striplings. The rest will serve our needs."

The priest stared after him, with no friendly expression; then turned, gesturing once more with the Staff. A knife flashed, severing the noose. Released, the prisoner stood swaying; he was bundled forward with scant ceremony, slung into the leading cart. The tail gate was latched shut; and Cha'Ensil rose in his stirrups, with a long yell. Whips cracked; the waggon turned jerkily from the line of march, lumbering to the south.

In the last of the light the vehicle and its escort reached a pass set between high chalk hills. The cloud-wrack, trailing skirts of mist, alternately hid and revealed the bulging slopes, crossed with sheep tracks, set with clumps of darker scrub. On the nearer crest, smears and bubbles of black showed the remnants of a village. On the flanks below sprawled a great chalk figure, while foursquare in the pass rose a steep and grassy mound. Across its summit, revealed by flickerings from above, curved a long ridge of roof; round it, among spikes and nodules of stone, straggled a mass of secondary building, pale plastered walls, gables of green-grey thatch. There was a stockade, topped with disembowelling spikes; and a gateway fronted by a deep ditch and flanked by vast drums of stone, themselves leaning till the arrow slits that once had faced the valley stared sightless at the green jungle below. Between them the party cantered, with a final jangle and clash. Torches were called for and a litter, the gates remanned; and Cha'Ensil moved upward across the sloping lower ward. The rising wind fluttered at his cloak, whipping the pine-knots into streaming beards of flame.

The little chamber was windowless and hot, hazed with a blue smoke heavy with the scent of poppies. Torchlight gleamed on white walls and close grey thatch, flickered on the Chief Priest's face as he stood expressionlessly, staring down. Finally he nodded. "This is well," he said. "Prepare him. Clean the dirt away."

A rustling of skirts, whisper of feet on the bare earth floor; clink of a costly copper bowl. The limbs of the sleeping boy

were sponged, his chest and belly washed with scented water. Lastly the stained cloth-cap was cut away.

The priest drew breath between his teeth. "His hands and feet," he said. "Neglect no skill."

The nails of the sleeper were cleaned with pointed sticks, the hair scraped from beneath his arms. His head was raised; his hair rinsed, combed with bone combs and rinsed again. Thunder grumbled close above the roof; and Cha'Ensil whitened his knuckles on his Staff. "Prepare his face," he said. "Use all your art."

Stoppers were withdrawn from jars of faceted crystal; the women, working delicately, heightened the eyelids with a ghosting of dark green, shaped the full brows to a gentler curve. The lashes, already lustrous, were blackened with a tiny brush. The sleeper sighed, and smiled.

"Now," said Cha'Ensil. "Those parts that make him like a God."

The nipples of the boy were stained with a bright dye; and the priest himself laid fingers to the groin, pressing and kneading till the member rose and firmed. Belly and thighs were brushed with a fine red powder; and Cha'Ensil stepped back. "Put the big necklet on him," he said. "And circlets for his arms."

The dreamer was set upright, a cloak of fine wool hung from his shoulders. The women waited, expectantly; and Cha'Ensil once more gripped the boy's chin, turned the face till the brilliant drugged eyes stared into his own. "You were dead," he muttered, "and you were raised. Blood ran from you; it was staunched. Mud dirtied you; it was washed away. Now you go as a God. Go by the Staff and Spear; and the God's strength be with you." He turned away, abruptly. "Take him to the Long House," he said. "Leave him in the place appointed, and return to me. We must pray."

The rumbling intensified, till it seemed boulders and great stones were rolled crashing through the sky. Lightning, flickering from cloud to cloud, showed the heads of grasses in restless motion, discovered hills and trees in washes of broad grey light. The light blazed far across the sea, flecking the restless plain of water; then the night was split.

With the breaking of the storm came rain. It fell not as rain customarily falls, but in sheets and solid bars; so that men in far-off villages, woken by the roaring on their roofs, saw

what seemed silver spears driven into the earth. The parched dust leaped and quivered; rivulets foamed, on the eroded flanks of hills; twigs and green leaves were beaten from the taller trees. In the chalk pass, the brook that circled the base of the mound raced in its deep bed; but toward dawn the violence died away. A morning wind moved across the hills, searching and cold as a knife; it brought with it a great sweet smell of leaves and fresh-soaked earth.

At first light two figures picked their way across the mound, moving between the fingers and bosses of stone. Both were cloaked, both masked. Once they turned, staring it seemed at the flanking slope, the ruins and the chalk colossus that glimmered in the grass; and the taller inclined his head. "My Lady," he said in a strong, musical voice, "when have I injured you, or played you false? When have my words to you not become true?"

The woman's voice when she answered was sharper-edged. "Cha'Ensile," she said, "we are both grown folk; grown older than our years perhaps in service of the God. So keep your tales for the little new priestesses; their lips are sweeter when they are afraid. Or tell them to the Horsemen, who are little children too. Perhaps there was a Great One in the land, long ago; but he left us, in a time best forgotten, and will scarcely return now. It isn't good to joke about such things; least of all to me."

They had reached the portal of the great hut crowning the mound. Above, green rush demons glared eyeless at the distant heath. To either side stood bundles of bound reeds, each taller than a man; the Signs of the God. The priest laid a hand to the nearer, smiling gravely. "Lady," he said, "wise you are most certainly, and wiser in many things than any man. Yet I say this. The God has many forms, and lives to some extent in each of us. In most men he is hidden; but I have seen him shine most gloriously. Now I tell you I found him, lashed to a Horseman's waggon. I knew him by the blood he shed, before I saw his face; for all Gods bleed, as penance for their people. I raised him with these hands, and placed him where he waits. As you will see."

She stared up at him. "Once," she said coldly, "a child came here, hungering for just such a God. Now I tell you this, Cha'Ensile; I raised you, and what is raised can be thrown down again. If you jest with me, you have jested once too often."

He spread his arms. "Lady," he said humbly, "my hands are at your service, and my heart. If I must give my head, then give

it I shall; and that right willingly." He stooped, preceding her into the darkness of the hut.

She paused, as always, at sight of the remembered place. She saw the floor of swept and beaten earth, the gleam of roofpoles in the half dark; she smelled the great pond-smell of the thatch. At the wattle screens that closed off the end of the long chamber she stopped again, uncertain; and his hand touched her arm. "Behold," he said softly. "See the God . . ."

The boy lay quiet on the bracken bed within, his breathing even and deep. A woollen shawl partly covered him; the priest lifted it aside, and heard her catch her breath. "If I mistook," he said, "then blame the weakness of my eyes on gathering age."

She took his wrist, not looking at him. "Priest," she said huskily, "there is wisdom in you. Wisdom and great love, that chides me what I spoke." She unfastened her cloak, laid it aside. "I will wait with him," she said, "and be here when he wakes. Let no-one else approach." She sat quietly on the edge of the bed, her hands in her lap; and Cha'Ensil bowed, slipping silently from the chamber.

Beyond the fringe of trees the hillside sloped broad and brilliant in sunlight. Above the boy as he lay the grass heads arched and whispered, each freighted with its load of golden specks. Between the stems he could see the valley and the tree-grown river, the reed beds where dragonflies hawked through the still afternoons. Beyond the river the chalk hills rose again, distant and massive. On the skyline, just visible from where he lay, stood the stockade and watchtower of his village.

His jerkin was unlaced; he wriggled luxuriously, feeling the coolness of the grass stroke belly and chest. He pulled a stem, lay sucking and nibbling at the sweetness. He closed his eyes; the hum of midsummer faded and boomed close, heavy with the throb of distant tides. Below him the sheep grazed the slope like fat woollen maggots; and the ram moved restlessly, bonking his wooden bell, staring with his little yellow eyes.

The boy's own eyes jerked open, narrowed.

She climbed slowly, crossing the hillside below him, gripping tussocks of grass to steady herself on the steepening slope. Once she straightened, seeming to stare directly toward where he lay; and he frowned and glanced behind him, as if considering further retreat. She stood hands on hips, searching the face of the hill; then turned away, continuing the long climb to the

crest. On the skyline she once more turned; a tall, brown-skinned girl, dark hair blowing across face and throat. Then she moved forward, and clumps of bushes hid her from his sight.

He groaned, as he had groaned before; a strange, husky noise, half between moan and whimper. His teeth pulled at his lip, distractedly; but already the blood was pounding in his ears. He glared, guilty, at the indifferently-cropping sheep, back to the skyline; then rose abruptly, hurrying from the shelter of the trees. Below the crest he stooped, dropping to hands and knees. He wriggled the rest of the way, peered down. The grass of the hillside was lush and long, spangled with the brilliant cups of flowers. He glimpsed her briefly, a hundred paces off; ducked, waited, and scuttled in pursuit.

There was a dell to which she came, he knew it well enough; a private place, screened with tangled bushes, shaded by a massive pale-trunked beech. He reached it panting, crawled to where he could once more see.

She lay on her back beneath the tree, hands clasped behind her head, her legs pushed out straight. Her feet were bare, and grimy round the shins; her skirt was drawn up, showing her long brown thighs. He edged forward, parting the grasses, groaning again. A long time she lay, still as a sleeper; then she began. She sat up, passing her hands across her breasts, squeezing them beneath her tunic. Then she pulled at its lacings; then shook her head till the hair cascaded across her face and rolled again and again, showing her belly, the great dark patch that meant now she was a woman.

His whole being seemed concentrated into his eyes; his eyes, and the burning tip of him that pressed the ground. He saw the shrine, unreachable; he saw her fingers go to it, and press; he saw her body arch, the vivid grass. Then sun and leaves rushed inward on him as a centre, the hillside flickered out; and he lay panting, fingers wet, hearing the echo of a cry that seemed as piercing as the long cry of a bird. After which he collected himself, ran with terror as he had run before, jerkin flapping, to the valley and trees and the safe, crunching sheep. Later he sobbed, for empty nights and days. His neck burned, and his cheek; he begged her forgiveness, she who could not hear, Daren whose father was rich, owning fifty goats and twice that number of sheep; Daren whose eyes he never more could meet, never, in the village street.

The dream disturbed him. He moved uneasily, wanting it to end; and in time it seemed his wish was answered. A fume or

acrid smoke seared his lungs; voices babbled; hands were on him, pressing down. It seemed he had descended to one of the Hells, where all is din and lurid light. He fought against the hands, bearing up with all his strength; and a bowl was thrust before his face. In it coals burned; their fiery breath scorched his throat. He writhed again, trying to pull back his head; but his hair was caught. The coals loomed close then seemed to recede, till they looked like a whole town burning far off in the night. After which the hard floor no longer pressed his knees. It seemed he was a bird, flying effortlessly upward into regions of greater and greater light. Then he knew he was no bird, but a God. And Dareen came to him, after all the years; he sank into her, rejoicing at last, and was content.

He was conscious at first of cool air on his skin. He rolled over, mumbling. The dream-time, though splendid, was finished; soon he must rise and dress, start his morning chores. The soup-pots must be skimmed, the fire stoked; billets waited to be split, the two lean cows must be milked. He wondered that he did not hear his father's rattling snores from the corner of the hut. A cock crowed, somewhere close; and he opened his eyes.

At first the dim shapes round him made no sense; then, it seemed on the instant, all memory returned. He leaped, trembling in every limb, to the farthest corner of the bracken bed. The movement woke the woman lying at his side.

Her body was brown; as brown as the remembered body of Dareen, and crusted on arms and legs with bands of gold. Save the rings she wore nothing but a mask of kingfisher-blue, through which her dark eyes glittered with terror in their gaze; but her voice when she spoke was musical and soft. "Don't be afraid," she said. "Don't be afraid, my Lord. No-one will hurt you here." She stretched an arm to him; he shrank farther into the angle of the wall, pushing shoulderblades into the rough wattle at his back. She chuckled at that and said again, "My Lord . . ." She pulled at the shawl he held gripped. He resisted, knuckles whitening; and it seemed behind the mask she might have smiled. "Why," she said, "you are proud and shy, which is as it should be. But the God has already entered you once, and that most wonderfully." She fell to stroking his calf and thigh, moving her fingers in cool little sweeps; and after a while the trembling of his body eased. "Lie down," she said, "and let me hold you; for you are very beautiful."

Truly it seemed the effects of the Magic Smoke had not yet left him; for despite his fear he felt his eyelids droop. She drew his face to her breasts, crooning and rocking; and lying with her was like lying with a great rustling bird.

The sun was high when next he opened his eyes, and the chamber empty. He sat up seeing the light stream through the chinks of the wattle screens. He rose shakily, staring down at the gold that ringed his own body, the great pectoral on his breast. This last on impulse he slipped from his neck, holding the shining metal close up to his eyes. The face of a stranger or a girl watched back. He laid the thing aside, frowning deeply, walked a pace at a time to the hut door. He cringed back then, terror rising afresh; for he knew the manner of place to which he had come. After which he needed to piss; this he did, trembling, against the wattle wall. An earthenware water jug stood beside the bed; he drank deeply, slaking his thirst. Then he wrapped the shawl round him and sat head in hands on the edge of the bed, and tried to think what he could do.

She came to him at midday, bringing food and drink. She helped him dress, washing him with scented oil, tucking his glory into a cloth of soft white wool. Although he cringed at first her hands were gentle; so that he all but overcame his fear of her. The fruit and bread he ate hungrily enough; the drink he spat out, expecting the taste of beer, and she laughed and told him it was Midsea wine. His head spun again at that for none of the village had ever tasted such a thing, not even T'Sagro who was the father of Dareen and who owned fifty goats. He drank again, and the second sip was better; so that he drained the cup and poured himself more, after which his head spun as it had spun when he sniffed the Magic Smoke. Also the wine made him bolder so that he said, "Why am I here?" These were the first words he had spoken.

She stared at him before she answered. Then she said, "Because you are a God." He frowned at this and asked, "Why am I a God?" and she told him in terms of forthrightness the like of which he had not heard, least of all from a woman. Also she had a trick of speech that seemed to go into his body, hardening it and creating desire. When she had left him he lay on the bed and thought he would sleep; but her words returned to him till he pulled the cloth aside and stared down at himself wondering if he might be as beautiful as she had said. Then he remembered his father and sister and the manner of their deaths, and wept. Toward nightfall he sat at the hut door and saw far off below the great fall of the hill smoke rise from

where perhaps the Horsemen burned another village that had refused its dues, and felt lonelier than ever in his life. Then tiredness came on him strongly so that he lay down once more and slept. She returned by moonlight, flitting like a moth; he woke to the cool length of her pressed at his side, her hands working at his cloth. He did with her as he had done in the dream, entering strongly, making her cry out with pleasure; till she had taken his strength, and he slept like one of the dead.

Later, when she brought his food, he said to her, "What are you called?" and she said in a low voice, "The Reborn". The fear returned at that; but night once more brought peace.

The days passed, merging each into the next; and though he dare not wander far from the hut he found himself anticipating her visits more keenly than before. Also no fear is wholly self-sustaining; he slept more soundly, colour returned to his cheeks. She brought him a polished shield, in which to see his reflection; he took to posing secretly before it, admiring the slender strength of his body, the savage painted eyes that stared back into his own. At such times he grew big with thinking of her, and fell to devising new means of pleasuring. Also he wondered greatly at her age; for at some times she seemed old as a hill or the great Gods of the chalk, at others as young and fragile as a child. He thought how easy it would be, one day, to pull the mask away; but always his hand was stayed. He talked now, when she came, with increasing freedom; till one day, greatly daring, he told her his wish that she could always be with him in the hut. She laughed at that, a low, rich sound of joy, and clapped her hands; after which she was constantly at his side, and a green-masked priest would come or a girl to bring their food, scratch the doorpost and wait humbly in the sunlight. She talked at great length, of all manner of things, and he to her; he told her of his life, and how he had herded sheep, and how it was to live in a village and be a peasant's child.

She said, "I know." She was sitting in the hut door; it was evening, the grass and tumbled stones of the hill golden in the slanting light. Goats bleated, on the slopes of the great mound; and the air was very still.

He laid his head in her lap; she stroked him awhile, then pulled back her hand. He sat up, meaning finally to speak of the mask; and she rose, stood arms folded staring out across the hill. After a while she spoke, back turned to him. "Altrin," she said, "do you truly love me?"

He nodded, watching up at her and wondering.

"Then," she said, "I will tell you a story. Once there was a little girl; younger than your sister, when you loved her and used to stroke her hair. She was in love too, with a certain God. He came to her in the night, promising many things; so that in her foolishness she wanted to be his Bride."

She half-turned; he saw the long muscles of her neck move as she swallowed. "She came to a certain House," she said. "She lay in that House, but there was no God. So she ran away. She became rich, and powerful. When she returned it was with gold and money-sticks, and soldiers of her own. Because of her wealth her people loved her; because of their love, she gave them a Sign." She nodded at the flanking slope, the sprawling giant with his mighty prick. "While the Sign lay on the hill, her people would be safe," she said. "This the God promised; yet he turned away his face. The Horse Warriors came; the people were killed, the village put to the fire. The servant of the God was killed, there on the hill."

He stared, swallowing in his turn; and the hut seemed very still.

"I was that child," she said. "I am the Reborn."

She stepped away from him. Her voice sounded distant, and very cold. "I lay on the hill," she said. "The God took me, and was very wonderful. Later, when he grew tired, he returned me to life. It was night, and there were many dead. I was one of them; and yet I crawled away. I crawled for a night and part of a day. I did not know where I was, or what had happened to me. I could not see, and there were many flies. I lay by a stream, and drank its water. Later I ate berries and leaves. I did not know what had happened to me. One day I decided a thing. I crawled to the stream and looked in, over the bank. The sun was high, so I saw myself clearly."

She shuddered, and her hand went to the mask. "I knew then I must die again," she said. "I had a little knife; but I lacked the strength to put it into myself. I got into the water, thinking I would drown; but the pain of that was too great also. I lay a day and night trying to starve; then I thought my heart might stop for wishing it. But the God refused my life, holding me strongly to the earth. I ate berries and fruit; and my strength returned."

The boy frowned, toying with a necklace she had given him; golden bees, joined by little blue beads. He reached forward, trying to trap her ankle; but she moved aside. "Can you think what it was like?" she said bitterly. "I had been beautiful; now the Gods had taken my face away."

He flinched a little; then went back to playing with the necklace, frowning up under his brows.

"I thought then, how I could get revenge on men," she said. "For men it was who had brought me to this pass. Then one day the God came to me, stirring me just a little. I had forgotten my body, which was as beautiful as ever. Also I couldn't find it in me to hate Him, who is yet the mightiest of Men. I clapped my hands; and he sent another Sign. A fishing bird flew past, dropping a feather on the water. I took it in my hand, seeing how it shone. I knew I could be beautiful again."

She twined her fingers, still staring at the great hill figure. "I made a mask, of grasses the sun had dried," she said. "And a crown of flowers for my hair. I bathed myself in the stream, and washed my clothes. I walked to where there had been huts and fields; but they were burned. So I walked to where there were other towns that the Horsemen had not destroyed. Near one of them I saw a girl-child herding geese. 'Leave your flock,' I said, 'and come with me. I am the Reborn, and the God is at my side.'

"Truly, he was with me; for she came. We lay together, and she pleased me. Her fingers were shy, like flowers. In the morning she brought me food. I saw a young man sowing winter wheat. 'I am the Reborn,' I said. 'Come with me, for the God is at my side.'

"So we came to where a village had stood, in a chalk pass next the sea. The Horse Warriors burned it; but being simple folk they had not dared my Hall. Nearby they had camped; for as yet they built no towns. I went to them. Thunder followed me, and fire-drakes in the sky. 'Put down your weapons,' I said. 'I am the Reborn, and the God is at my side.' The gold they had stolen I took from them, and cloth from the Yellow Lands to dress my priests. So I came home in a litter, as of old, with Hornmen before me and my own folk round about. Yet there were none to welcome me. Instead were many ghosts; Cha'Acta, whom I killed, and Magan, whom I killed, and many more. They would not let me be.

"The Horsemen came, asking what tribute the God desired. I made them fetch me skins of fishing birds. The sower of wheat came to me. I asked how he was called. 'Ensil,' he said, 'if it please my Lady.' 'Then you are Cha'Ensil,' I said, 'and a mighty priest. Be faithful, and you shall be mightier.'

"Yet my Hall was empty; he whom once I knew had fled. The wheat sprang green and tall; naught sprang from me but tears. The Horsemen brought me tribute; yet I grieved. Then

one day Cha'Ensile came to me again. He told me how he had found the God. I did not believe. He brought me to his House; and there he lay, young and beautiful, with no cloth to cover him." She turned suddenly with something like a sob, fell to her knees and pressed her face against his thighs. "Never leave me," she said. "Never go away."

He stroked her lustrous hair, frowning through the doorway of the hut, his eyes remote.

The long summer was passing; mornings were misty and blue, a cold chill crept into the God House of nights. Faggots were brought and stacked, a great fire lit on the hard earth floor of the hut. Some days now she would barely let him rise from the couch. Many times when he was tired she roused him, showing a 'Magic Thing her body could do; when all else failed there was the seedsmoke, and the yellow wine. She bathed him, stroking and combing his hair—wild it was and long—brushing his shoulders like silk. Finally these things palled. Winter was on the land; the fields lay sere and brown, cold winds droned through the God House finding every chink in the wattle walls. He brooded, shivering a little, beside the fire; and his decision was reached. Custom had taught him her ways; he broached the subject delicately, as befitted his station.

"Sometimes," he said, "as you will know better than I, even Gods desire to ride abroad and see something of the country they own. I have such a desire; perhaps the God you say is in me is making his wishes felt."

She seemed well pleased. "This is good," she said. "When the people see you they will be glad, knowing the God is with them. I will ride with you; we must speak to my priest."

In the months that had passed he had rarely seen Cha'Ensile; now he was summoned in haste. He came in state, resplendent in his robes of patterned silk. With him he brought his women; but at that the Reborn demurred. "I will prepare the God," she said. "I and no other; for his is no common beauty."

His hands, which had been calloused, had softened from idleness. She pared and polished his nails, tinting his palms and feet with a dark red stain. His hair she bound with delicate silver leaves, and clothes were brought for him; a cloak of dazzling silk, a tunic with the Corn Lord's brodered Sign, boots of soft leather that cased him to the knee. Lastly she gave him a strong white mare, tribute from a chieftain of the Horse People. He sat the creature gingerly enough when the time came, being more used to plough-oxen; but she was docile, and his ineptness went unremarked.

So the party set out; Cha'Ensil with his priests and soldiers, his Horn and Cymbal men; the Beautiful One on his splendid mount; the Reborn and her favoured women in tinkling litters, borne on the backs of sturdy bearers and swaying with the God's gilded plumes. They crossed the Great Heath to the villages of the Plain, curved north and west nearly to the lands of the Marsh Folk, who pay no taxes and do strange things to please their Gods. Everywhere the Horsemen bent the knee, placing hands to their beards in awe; for the Corn Lord was a mighty spirit, his fame reached very far. For Altrin, each day brought further earnest of his strength; and Mata watched with pride to see the young Prince she had made dash happy as a puppy, circling to her call.

Chieftain after chieftain hastened with gifts; and the tribute from the grim towns of the Horsemen was richest of all. The treasure waggons towered toward the end, while behind them trotted a bleating flock of goats. The eyes of the Beautiful One grew narrow at that, his mind busy; till he summoned Cha'Ensil, more curtly perhaps than one should summon a Chief Priest, to demand an accounting of the God's dues.

Cha'Ensil frowned, holding up the notched sticks on which he carved his marks; but the Prince pushed them scornfully aside. "Everywhere I see villages that are rich," he said. "Both our own folk's towns and those of the Horsemen. Yet we are poor, owning barely five hundred goats and scarce that number of sheep. The Corn Lord brings this prosperity; let his tallies be increased."

Cha'Ensil set his lips into a line. "That is for the Reborn to decide, my Lord," he said gently. "For she is your Mistress, as she is mine."

But Altrin merely laughed, flinging the bone of a game bird into the fire round which they were camped. "Her will is mine," he said, "and so mine is hers. Increase the tallies; I will have a thousand goats by autumn."

Cha'Ensil's face had paled a little; yet he still spoke mildly. "Perhaps," he said, "even Princes may overreach themselves, my Lord. Also, favours freely given may freely be repented."

The boy spat contemptuously. "Priest, I will tell you a riddle," he said. "I have a certain thing about me that is long and hard. With it I defend the favours that are mine; and yet I carry no sword. What do you think it could be?"

The other turned away, shuddering and making a very strange mouth; and for the time being nothing more was said.

Later, Altrin had a novel idea. First he loved the Reborn

with more than usual fervour, making her pant with pleasure; then he lay with his head against her breasts, feeling beneath him the swell of her belly that was so unlike the belly of a girl. "My Lady," he said, "it has come to me that you have been more than generous in your gifts. Yet one thing I lack, and desire it most of all."

She laughed, playing with his hair. "The God is greedy," she said. "But that is the way with Gods; and I for one am very glad of it. What do you wish?"

He drew his dangling hair across her breasts, and felt her tense. "Cha'Ensil, who is a priest, has many soldiers," he said. "They defend him, running to do his errands, and are at his beck and call. Yet I, in whom the God himself lives, have none. Surely my state should equal his, particularly if I am to ride abroad."

She was still awhile, and he thought perhaps she was frowning. Finally she shook her head. "A God needs no soldiers," she said. "His strength is his own, none dares to raise a hand. Soldiers are well enough for lesser folk; besides, Cha'Ensil is my oldest servant. I would not see him wronged."

He sensed that he was on dangerous ground, and let the matter rest; but later he withheld himself, on pain of a certain promise. That she gave him finally, when she was tired and her body could no longer resist. He slept curled in her arms, and well content.

The party returned to the high House on the chalk. Once its walls would have been ritually breached; but that was in the old time, long since gone. In every room of the complex fires roared high, fighting the winter chill. The days closed in, howling and bitter; and the snow came, first a powdering then a steadier fall. Deep drifts gathered on the eaves of the God House, blanketing the demons that clung there. But rugs were hung round the walls of the inner chamber, a second fire lit before the wattle screens; and the Reborn and her Lord dined well enough night after night, on wild pig and wine. Sometimes too the priests of the household, or their women, arranged entertainments; at devising these last the Prince showed himself more than usually adroit, and in his mistress's heart there stirred perhaps the first faint pang of doubt.

With the spring, Altrin rode out again. He took with him a dozen men of his new bodyguard, later recruiting as many Horsemen into his train. The party rode east, to where fishing villages clustered round a great bight of the sea and the Black Rock begins which none may cross, Divine or otherwise. Every-

where folk quailed before the young God with his cold, lovely eyes; and what those eyes happened on, he took. Grain he sent back and goats; and once a girl-child for his Mistress, to be trained in the rites of the God. Two weeks passed, three, before he turned back to the west. The Horsemen he dismissed, paying them with grain, hides and gold from his own supply; later that day he strode back into the hut on the Sacred Mound.

She was waiting for him, in a new gauzy dress of white and green. What expression her face held could not be told; but she was pacing forward and back along the beaten earth floor, her arms folded, her chin sunk on her chest. He hurried to her, taking her arms; but she snatched herself away. "What is this?" he said, half-laughing. "Are you not pleased to see me?"

She stamped her slim foot. "Where have you been?" she said. "What are you thinking of? I cried for you for a week. Then I was angry, then I cried again. Now—I don't care if you've come back or not."

A bowl and cup stood on an inlaid table, part of his winter spoil. He poured wine for himself, drank and wiped his mouth. "I sent you a pretty child to play with," he said. "Wasn't that enough?"

"And I sent her back," she said. "I didn't want her. What use are girls to me now? It was you I wanted. *Oh . . .*"

He flung the wine away, angrily. "You tell me I am a God," he said. "I wear a God's clothes, live in a God's house. Yet I must answer like a ploughboy for everything I do."

"Not a ploughboy," she said, "a sheep herder. A peasant you were, a peasant you remain. *Ohh . . .*" He had turned on his heel; and she was clinging to him with desperate strength. "I wanted you," she said. "I wanted you, I was so lonely. I wanted to die again. I didn't mean what I said, please don't go away. Do what you choose; but please don't go away . . ."

He stood frowning down, sensing his power. As ever, her nearness roused him; yet obscurely there was the need to hurt. His fingers curled on the edge of the brilliant mask; for an instant it seemed he would tear the thing aside, then he relaxed. "Go to our chamber," he said coldly. "Make yourself ready; perhaps, if my greeting is more fitting, I shall come to you."

Cha'Ensil, stepping to the doorway of the hut, heard the words and the sobs that answered them. He stood still a moment, face impassive; then turned, walking swiftly back the way he had come.

Some days afterward the hilltop began to bustle with activity. A new Hall was rising, below the God House and some forty

paces distant; for the Reborn had decreed the older structure too chilly to serve another winter. Also extra accommodation was needed for the many hopefuls flocking to join the priesthood. The fame of the God was spreading; all were anxious to share his good fortune. The Prince himself took a keen interest in the newcomers, selecting (or so it seemed) the comeliest virgins and the least prepossessing men; but Cha'Ensil held himself aloof from the entire affair. Later the Beautiful One rode north, and again. An extra granary was built, a new range of stables; and still the tribute waggons trundled down to the great gap in the chalk. The Horsemen bore hard upon the land; and wherever they rode, there also went the ensigns of the God. Smoke rose from a score of burning villages; and at last it was time, high time, to cry enough.

Cha'Ensil, seeking an audience with the Prince, found him in the New Hall, where he was accustomed to take his ease. He lay on a divan draped with yellow silk, a wine jug at his elbow and a cup. He greeted Cha'Ensil casually enough, waving him to a seat with a hand that flashed with gold. "Well, priest," he said, "say what you have to quickly, and be gone. My Mistress waits; and tonight the strength of the God is more than usually in me. I shall take her several times."

The priest swallowed but sat as he was bidden, gathering his robes about him. "My Prince," he began reasonably enough, "I, who raised you to your estate, have every right to counsel you. We live, as you know full well, by the good will of the Horsemen. They fear the God; but they are children, and greed may outrun fear. This show of magnificence you seem so set on will end in ruin; for you, and for us all."

The Prince drained the cup at a gulp, and poured another. "This show, which is no more than my due, makes you uneasy," he said. "You lie jealous in your bed; and for more reasons than the ones you state. Now hear me. My strength may or may not come from the God; personally I think it does, but that is beside the point. Behind me stands One whose will is not lightly crossed; while I satisfy her, and satisfy her I think I do, your power is ended. Now leave me. Whine to your women, if you must; I am easily tired by foolishness."

Cha'Ensil rose, his face white with rage. "Shepherd boy," he said, "I saved you for my Lady. For her sake have I borne with you; now I tell you this. I will not see her and her House destroyed. Take warning—"

He stopped, abruptly; for Altrin had also risen to his feet, swaying a little from the wine. A cloak, richly embroidered,

hung from his shoulders; save for a little cloth, he was otherwise naked. "And I tell you this, sower of winter wheat," he said, "that when the strength goes from me, I may fall. But that is hardly likely yet." He squeezed, insultingly, the great thrusting at his groin, then snatched at his hip. "Priest," he jeered, "will you see the power of the God?"

But the other, mouth working, had blundered from the chamber. Behind him as he hurried away rose the mocking laughter of the Beautiful One.

The horse drummed across the Heath, raising behind it a thin plume of whitish dust. Its rider, cloaked and masked, carried a great Staff of Power. He crouched low in the saddle, driving his heels at the beast's sides to urge it to even greater speed. While the fury gripped him Cha'Ensil made good time; later he slowed the weary animal to a walk. Midday found him clear of the Great Heath; at dusk he presented himself at the gates of a city of the Horsemen, a square, spike-walled fortress set above rolling woodland on a spur of chalk. There he instituted certain enquiries; while his status, and the gold he bore, secured him lodging for the night together with other services dearer to his heart. For the Chief Priest had by no means wasted his opportunities since taking service with the God of the great chalk pass. The morning brought answers to his questions. More gold changed hands; and Cha'Ensil rode north again, on a mount sounder in wind than the one on which he had arrived. Half-way through the day he bespoke a waggon train; the drivers waved him on, pointing with their whips. At nightfall, out in the vastness of the Great Plain, he reached his destination; the capital of the Horsemen's southern kingdom, a place resplendent with watchtowers and granaries, barracks and Royal courts.

Here the power of the Corn Lord was less directly felt. Cha'Ensil fumed at the gates an hour or more before his purse, if not his master, secured admission. He made his way through rutted earth streets to the house of a Midsea merchant, a trader who for his unique services was tolerated even by the Horsemen. Once more, gold secured admission; and a slave with a torch conducted him to the chamber of his choice. A heavy door was unbolted, chains clinked back; and the priest stepped forward, wrinkling his nose at the odour that assailed him. To either side in the gloom stretched filthy straw pallets. All were occupied; some by women, some by young boys. The slave grunted, gesturing with the torch; and the other called, sharply.

Nothing.

Cha'Ensil spoke again; and a voice answered sullenly from the farther shadows. It said, "What do you want with me?"

He took the torch, stepped forward and stared. Dull eyes, black-shadowed, watched up from a pallid face. The girl's hair sprawled lank on the straw; over her was thrown a ragged blanket. Cha'Ensil raised his brows, speaking gently; for answer she spat, turning her face from the glare.

The priest stooped, mouth puckered with distaste. Beneath the blanket she was naked; he searched her body swiftly for the signs of a certain disease. There were none; and he sat back on his heels with a sigh. "Rise, and find yourself a cloth," he said. "I am your friend, and knew your father well. I have come to take you away from this place, back to your home."

Cha'Ensil returned to the God House alone some few days later, and hastened to make obeisance to his mistress; but it seemed his absence had not been too much noticed. He served the Reborn well in the weeks that followed, and was unfailing in his courtesy to Altrin when chance placed the Beautiful One in his path; for his heart was more at rest.

Two months passed, and a third; the green of summer was changing to flaunting gold when he once more rode from the Sacred Mound. He headed south, to a village well enough known to him. Here, on a promontory overlooking the sparkling sweep of the sea, stood just such a Hall as the one he had quitted. He presented himself at the stockade, and was courteously received. Later he was conducted by tortuous paths to a tiny bay, closed on either side by headlands of tumbled rock. A dozen children played in the crash and surge of the water, watched over by a priest and a seamed-faced woman who was their instructress in the Mysteries. A purse changed hands; and the woman called, shrilly.

Cha'Ensil peered, shading his eyes. A lithe, brown-skinned girl waded from the water; she stood before him boldly, wearing neither cloth nor band, returning his scrutiny with a slow smile. He spoke, uncertainly; for answer she knelt before him, lowering her head as the ritual dictates.

He nodded, well pleased. "You have worked excellently, Cha'Igo," he said. "The God defend and prosper you." Then to the woman, "See she is dressed, and readied for a journey. I leave inside the hour."

That day a new priestess arrived at the Hall of the Reborn; and Cha'Ensil, whose office it was, conducted her to the Presence with pride. Altrin, seated grandly to one side, did not speak; but his eyes followed the girl as she moved through

the forms of greeting and Cha'Ensil, watching sidelong, saw his brows furrow into a frown.

The opportunity for which the Chief Priest had waited was not long in coming. He was sent for, brusquely enough; a few minutes later, his face composed, he stooped into the presence of Altrin.

The Beautiful One, it seemed, was more than a little drunk. He eyed Cha'Ensil balefully before he spoke; then he said roughly, "Who is she, husbandman?"

Cha'Ensil smiled soothingly. "To whom," he said, "does my Lord refer?"

The other swore, reaching for the wine bowl. Its contents spilled; the Chief Priest hastened to assist him. The cup was recharged; Altrin, flushed, sat back and belched. He said again, "Who is she?"

Cha'Ensil smiled once more. "Some child of a chalk hill farmer," he said. "An apt pupil, as I have been told; she will no doubt prove an asset to the House."

"Who is she?"

"Her name is Dareen," said the Chief Priest steadily. "The daughter of T'Sagro. Your father's neighbour, Prince."

The other stared. He said huskily, "How can this be?"

"I found her, in a certain place," said Cha'Ensil. "I freed her, thinking it would be your will." He extended his arms. "The enmity between us is ended," he said. "Let her happiness be my peace-gift to you, Lord."

Altrin rose, his brows contracted to a scowl. He said, "Bring her to me."

Cha'Ensil lowered his eyes. "Sir, it is hardly wise . . ."

"Bring her . . .!"

The other bowed. He said, "It shall be as my Lord desires."

The night was windy; the growing complex of wooden buildings groaned and shifted, alive with creaks and rustlings. Torches burned in sconces; by their light the pair negotiated a corridor hewn partly from the chalk, tapped at a door. A muffled answer; and the Chief Priest raised the latch, propelling the girl gently forward. He said, "My Lord, the priestess Dareen." He closed the door, waited a moment head cocked; then padded softly away.

She faced him across the room. She said in a low voice, "Why did you send for me?"

He moved forward, seemingly dazed. He said, "Dareen?" He reached to part the cloak she wore; and she knocked his arm away. She said furiously, "*Don't touch me.*"

He flushed at that, the wine buzzing in his brain. He said thickly, "I touch who I please. I command who I please. I am the God."

She stared, open-mouthed; then she began to laugh. "You?" she said. "You, a God? Who herded sheep on the hillside, and dare not lift eyes to me in the street? Now . . . a God . . . forgive me, my Lord Sheepdrover. This is too sudden . . ."

He glared at her. He said, "I did not choose to raise my eyes to you. You were a child."

She snarled at him, "*You did not choose . . .*" She swallowed, clenching her fists. "Day after day I walked to where you lay," she said. "And day after day you watched me, like a silly little boy, and played with yourself in the grass because you were afraid. I humbled myself, in sight of you; because I wanted you, I wanted you to come and take me. But you never came. You never came because you dare not. Now leave me in peace. You are no man for me."

He grabbed the cloak, wrenched. Beneath, she wore the green and gold of a priestess. Her waist was cinched by a glittering belt; her breasts jutted boldly at the thin cloth of her tunic. He gripped her; and she swung her hand flat-palmed. The slap rang in the little chamber; he doubled his fist, eyes swimming, and she staggered. Silence fell; in the quiet she probed at a wobbling tooth, rubbed her lips, stared at the smudge of red on the back of her hand. Then her bruised mouth smiled. "I see," she said. "Now I suppose you will beat me. Perhaps you will kill me. How very brave that would be." She circled, staring. "Now you are a God," she said. "What happened to me, when you became a God? And Tamlin, and Sirri, and Merri, and all the others? Do you know?" Her eyes blazed at him. "Tamlin died on a treadmill," she said. "Sirri was sold to the King of the Horsemen, who beat her till he broke her back. Merri has the sickness the Midsea people bring. I went to a whorehouse; while a certain God, whose name we will not speak, dressed in silk and called himself a man." She wiped her mouth again. "Well, go on," she said. "Beat me; or call your priests to do it for you. Then you can lie in peace, with your old fat woman who doesn't have a face—"

She got no further. His hands went to her throat; she tore an arm free, struck at him again. A wrestling; then her mouth was on his. She was groping for him, pulling and wrenching at his cloth.

Much later, when all was over, he began to cry. She cradled him then in the dark, pressing his mouth to her breast, calling

him by a name his mother used when he was a tiny child.

He woke heavy with sleep, and she had rolled from him. He groped for her, needing her warmth after the many years. She nuzzled him, smiling and stroking; and the door of the chamber swung slowly inward.

He sat up, appalled. He saw the mask of glittering blue, the Chief Priest at her side. He sprang forward with a shout; but he was too late. The door banged shut; he wrenched it back, but the corridor beyond was empty. The Reborn and her minister were gone.

The light grew, across the Heath. Above him the high hill and its buildings lay deserted; and a drizzle was falling, drifting from the dull void of the sky.

He moved with a desperate urgency, stooping low, fingers clutched round the wrist of the frightened girl. The stockade was before him, and the high lashed gates. He climbed, scrambling, reached back to her. Her skirt tore; she landed beside him with a thud, glared back and up. He took her wrist again, slithering on the steep grass of the ditch, pushing aside the soaked branches of trees.

From a chamber high on the Mound, the Reborn stared down. No quiver, no movement betrayed her breathing; beside her, Cha'Ensil's face was set like stone. The fugitives vanished, reappeared on the farther slope. The woman stiffened; and the priest turned to her, head bowed. He said, "My Lady?"

She turned away, hands to the feathered mask. She said, "He must come back, Cha'Ensil."

He waited; and her shoulders shook. He said gently, "And if he will not?"

The muffled words seemed dragged from her. She said, "Then none will sit beside me. None must know our secrets, priest. Or what power we have, is gone . . ." She waited then; till the latch clicked, the sound of his footsteps died. She dropped to her knees, crept to the corner of the little room. She pushed the bird-mask from her, and began to sob.

Beside the great mound the brook ran swift and silent between fern-hung banks. A fallen tree spanned it, stark in the early light. He crossed awkwardly, turned back to the girl. Sweat was

on his face; he stared up at the Mound, plunged on again. Beyond the brook grew clumps of waist-high grass. He staggered between them, brown bog-water about his calves. There was a swell of rising ground; he fell to his knees, the girl beside him, hung his head and panted.

A voice said quietly, "Where to now, my Lord?"

He raised his face, slowly. Round him the semicircle of figures stood grey against the sky. A few paces beyond, masked and cloaked, was the priest. The Beautiful One glared, licking his mouth, and raised a shaking finger. "Eldron, Melgro, Baath," he said. "You are my men. Save me from treachery . . ."

The man called Eldron stepped forward, stood looking down. "Wake the thunder, Prince," he muttered. He whirled the heavy club he carried, struck. The Prince collapsed, setting up a hoarse bawling.

Melgro wiped his face. "Bow the trees down, Lord," he said, and struck in turn.

Baath, smiling, drew a heavy-bladed knife. "Rouse the lightning, ploughboy," he said, "and I will call you God." He drove with the blade; and the little group closed in, hacking in silence. Bright drops flew, spattering the rough grey grass; the bawls changed to a high-pitched keening that was cut off in its turn. The body rolled a little way, back to the water; shook, and was still.

The girl crouched where she had fallen, unmoving. As the priest approached she raised a face that was chalk-white beneath its tan. "Why, priest?" she said, small-voiced. "Why?"

Cha'Ensil stooped above her, drawing a little dagger from his belt. He said, "I loved him too." He pulled her head back quickly, and used the knife.

GORGIAS

PEDER CARLSSON

1. Nothing is.
 - 1.01. Twilight.
 - 1.02. Night.
 - 1.021. Stars.
 - 1.0211. Unless, of course, the night is cloudy, in which case you have:
 - 1.02111. Partial cloudiness, or:
 - 1.02112. Total—or should that be absolute?—cloudiness.
 - 1.022. Moon.
 - 1.0221. Full moon.
 - 1.0222. Half moon.
 - 1.02221. This way.
 - 1.02222. The other way.
 - 1.0223. No moon at all.
 - 1.0224. Anything in between.
 - 1.0225. See 1.0211.
 - 1.023. Various celestial phenomena.
 - 1.1. The strongest argument against solipsism was that if the world was only in my mind, I would surely have been able to make it a better world.
 - 1.11. Of course I don't know what "a better world" really is.
 - 1.111. See 1.
2. Should it be the case that something is, I cannot know of it.
 - 2.01. For I know nothing.
 - 2.1. The ship came in from the cold of outer space, black with silver lines along its sides.
 - 2.101. See 1.02.
 - 2.1011. No clouds in space.
 - 2.1012. Stars: bright, unblinking diamond needle-pricks in the jet black velvet of nothing.
 - 2.11. The ship's name: the M.S. *Gorgias*.
 - 2.111. "M.S." stands for "meta ship".

- 2.12. The ship's mission: to explore the nothingness of nothing.
- 2.13. The ship's crew: one man who, at times, thinks that he is in possession of an awareness. At other times he is not so certain. At other times yet he thinks not.
- 2.1301. I am the man.
- 2.131. When I was twenty-two years old I had decided that life was absurdly devoid of meaning. A psychiatrist I saw then said that it was only a symptom of youthfulness.
- 2.13101. I felt very old.
- 2.1311. Some things never change.
- 2.132. As it were I never did grow any younger.
- 2.133. Or maybe I didn't grow older.
- 2.1331. I don't know.
- 2.13311. See 2.01.
- 2.134. Eventually I gave in to my desire of nothing and went into space by various devious ways.
- 2.1341. It was, I know now, inevitable.
- 2.2. Near the centre of the Andromeda galaxy there is a hole in space.
- 2.21. The hole, as far as the scientists have been able to decide, appears to have indefinite dimension and to be of indefinite size.
- 2.22. Some scientists with cosmological leanings, taking examples from quantum theory, have speculated that this hole in space, because it appears to be of indefinite size, will behave similarly to a hole in a "sea" of electrons, that is: the hole will behave like the hypothetical spatial concept most scientists agree to call "anti-space", just as an electron-hole behaves like an anti-electron, a positron.
- 2.221. Nobody seemed to know for certain, however.
- 2.23. Intrigued by this puzzling phenomenon, I decided to go there myself.
- 2.2301. Consequently I read everything about it that I could get my hands on.
- 2.2302. The mathematical models of the hole proved to be fascinating.
- 2.231. Most of the people concerned with it appeared to be in agreement that it was best described by an n -dimensional matrix with quasi-complex elements.
- 2.2311. The theory of quasi-complex numbers had been set forth by a Nigerian mathematician near the end of the 22nd century; they behaved largely like complex numbers, but it was possible to construct a total order on them. Apart from

- that they had certain other interesting qualities, into which I cannot here delve further.
- 2.2312. The theory of n -dimensional matrices, again, had been developed about half a century earlier by a fifteen-year-old Finnish mathematical prodigy, who, at nineteen, knowing he had burnt himself out as a mathematician, retired into the vast woods still growing on the tundra of northern Finland to lead an hermit's life.
- 2.23121. The n -dimensional matrices came to have their most rewarding application in the theory of super-dimensional topology, most cherished analytical weapon of the so-called New Cosmology.
- 2.2313. The (unavoidable?) disagreement was as to the values of the different constants involved in the model, first and foremost, of course, the dimension n .
- 2.23131. Some people, notably a Scottish priest and amateur cosmologist, even tried to give n a transcendental value, but the more earth-bound scientists kept to the whole numbers.
- 2.23132. Some headway seemed to be made, however, by a prominent Cambridge senior lecturer on *Mathematical N-dimensional Models of Traditional Metaphysics*, who tried to give the value of n as a negative integer.
- 2.23133. The speculations about the values of the other constants were even more stimulating.
- 2.24. While reading up on what my destination might be like, I had managed, by extensive pulling of strings, vigorous exertion of what influence I might have had at the appropriate sources, some downright breaches of the law and plain stubbornness, to secure a specimen of the latest design in meta ships, which, in a moment of sophistic fancy, I christened the *Gorgias*.
- 2.241. A meta ship derives its name from its mode of propulsion.
- 2.2411. Its exterior is that of a quite ordinary space ship, but once you get inside one you will notice, provided of course that you are an experienced space pilot, and if you manage to get into the cockpit of an M.S. you probably are, a number of unfamiliar instruments and controls. These, then, control the meta field, which propels the ship.
- 2.2412. A meta field, briefly, may profitably be thought of as the epitome of contemporary scientific abstraction.
- 2.2413. A meta field, more elaborately, is the most spectacular spoil from the so-called para-technological application of

that happy union of modern scholastics and basically sound 20th century scientific thinking, to wit logicised metaphysics—during the last two centuries virtually all of traditional philosophy has been formalised—and old-fashioned general relativistic field theory, which in abstract physics is known as meta-relativistic field logic; the whole, truly, being considerably more than the sum of the parts.

2.24131. This discipline uses for its symbolism a logicised variety of the theory of n -dimensional matrices. More I regret I am not able to disclose for fear of coming into unpleasant conflict with the Terran Official Secrets Act.

2.24132. I can divulge, however, that with a meta ship you can overcome any limitation that the theory of relativity imposes on your travelling; also a meta ship seems to be impervious to the kind of matter with which it comes into contact. Thus travelling with an M.S. in the anti-matter regions of the universe will have no more staggering consequences than a leisurely cruise around the solar system. Hopefully the case would be the same in anti-space.

2.242. The *Gorgias* was indubitably the most suitable vehicle available—if you were just unscrupulous enough—for a journey to a hole in space near the centre of the Andromeda galaxy.

2.2421. Natural sciences have certainly come a long way since the theory of relativity and crude quantum theory of the latter part of the 20th century.

2.2422. I am an experienced space pilot, with two apprentice years of shuttling “torches” all over the solar system, and five years of running standard (euphemism for old-fashioned) M.S. freighters on the Centauri route behind me.

2.24221. I preferred meta ships because they could perfectly well be run with a crew of one and freighters because in them there was absolutely no need for more than the minimum crew.

2.24222. I left my job with the *Milky Way Trading Co Ltd* after I had decided to go to Andromeda.

2.3. Having stocked up the *Gorgias* with all the necessary equipment and checked everything down to the minutest detail, I left for Andromeda.

2.31. The trip was, as are all M.S. trips, uneventful.

2.311. I spent quite a number of the twenty-seven days it took thinking over why there had never been any official scientific expedition sent to Andromeda, when perfectly safe and suit-

- able meta ships were available and the hole in space did cause so much consternation.
- 2.3111. Now I had to sneak away quite illegally, to be honest, pretending that my destination was Neptune, and that I really had some official leave even for going there.
- 2.3112. Half-way to Andromeda I had come to the conclusion that, though scientifically most interesting, the hole didn't have enough military promise to motivate a lift of the ban on intergalactic flight that had been imposed by the conservative, military-dominated Space Authorities after they, quite inexplicably, had lost two scout ships during the first attempt to reach other galaxies.
- 2.31121. This caused me to meditate at some length on the fact that once there had been a time when science didn't have to have a military value to be encouraged.
- 2.312. The rest of the time I spent reading Omar Khayyam's *Rubaiyat* and staring out the observation dome into meta-space.
- 2.3121. Meta-space is a metaphysical abstraction of ordinary space.
- 2.31211. Thus the only thing that distinguishes meta-space from ordinary space, or norm-space as some prefer to call it, is that you can run a meta ship through it.
- 2.4. A hole in space near the centre of the Andromeda galaxy is, if you didn't know, just that.
- 2.401. A hole.
- 2.41. The hole was situated near a cluster of G and K class population II stars in an already dense sector about 90 parsec from the centre and virtually in the plane of the galaxy.
- 2.42. Having been discovered indirectly by a peculiar, until then unknown warping of the polarisation of the light from the stars behind it, the hole did not appear very tangible.
- 2.4201. The phenomenon by which the hole had been discovered was satisfyingly explained by the dominating mathematical model, regardless of the disagreement as to the constants.
- 2.421. What could be seen was a region, which, though perfectly as black as the surrounding space, seemed to have an almost limpid quality, the light from the stars behind it possessing a crystalline sheen.
- 2.4211. The hole was quite beautiful, and I spent a long time, quietly adrift in space, just looking at it.
- 2.43. Eventually, filled up with its beauty, I threw the *Gorgias* into meta drive and steered her into the centre of the hole.

- 2.5. A hole in space is so empty you can know the dragons play.
- 2.51. I spent an eternity of awareness in the glorious emptiness of the hole, suspended within the n -dimensional abstraction of my dreams, alone with myself and the green, cerise and golden-scaled mathematical dragons of future meta-sophic wisdom.
- 2.6. With the emptiness of my mind brimming over with contentment I finally left the hole and set the *Gorgias* on her course towards Sol.
- 2.7. See 2.1.
- 2.8. Outside the orbit of Neptune I was met by two S.A. "Rigel" class M.S. destroyers that escorted me all the way to Terra, a matter of a few hours.
- 2.8001. The destroyers were the G.T.S. *Gamma Canii* and the G.T.S. *Proxima Ursae Majoris*, with a crew each of 153 men and a resident nurse, and armed each with six Wayne-Hardy Auto-Aligning Meta-Parabolic Subjugator tubes.
- 2.80011. "G.T.S." stands for "Good Terran Ship".
- 2.801. Though able to transcend the theory of relativity, a meta ship, meta-space being metaphysically isomorphic to ordinary space, has to operate within the confines of bended space.
- 2.8011. One consequence of this confinement is that a meta field is not very effective where space is sharply bended, that is, near great masses like planets and suns.
- 2.80111. This, you will have gathered, is the explanation why, though my trip to Andromeda took twenty-seven days, the trip from Neptune to Terra took so comparatively long time as a few hours.
- 2.80112. The almost entirely mass-free intergalactic space is so nearly Euclidean, or "straight", that I was able to travel very quickly, indeed.
- 2.8012. To propel a meta ship in meta drive at anything over the optimum speed in sharply bended regions of space and to start and land "earth-side" requires such enormous amounts of energy as to be practically impossible, and even travelling within the solar system with its great concentration of mass is so uneconomical that interplanetary flight is exclusively accomplished in conventional ships popularly called "torches"; it is first on interstellar routes that meta ships are economical.
- 2.80121. Only the S.A. Navy, thanks to almost unlimited funds for the military, can afford to let its M.S. destroyer roam at large all over the solar system in meta drive.

2.801211. This considered, it is obvious that my going to Neptune in a meta ship indeed should have aroused more suspicions in certain quarters than it really did, even in spite of the fact that I had tried my best to intimate reasons important enough to warrant such improper expenditure.

2.80122. To start and land all meta ships are equipped with a complementary "torch" drive.

2.80123. The "torches", though electromagnetically powered, retain their nickname from the first outer space vehicles, which were actually rocket-driven. Not many people are aware of this fact, but most spacemen, in the course of their training, come into contact with this quaint piece of space lore.

2.81. It appeared that my failure to show up at Neptune had caused some worry.

2.811. A thorough investigation on all levels had, however, revealed my recent interest in a certain hole in space near the centre of the Andromeda galaxy, and the Space Authorities soon arrived at the correct conclusions, whereupon they all sat down to wait.

2.82. As it were I was, understandably, unable to give the S.A. any information of military interest, and, after some discussion to and fro, in which I took little part, I was turned free with a stern warning never to do a thing like that again, a suspension for five years of my permit as a space pilot and rather heavy but bearable fines.

2.83. The *Gorgias* was, of course, confiscated.

2.831. I did not grieve overly much.

3. Should it be the case that I know something, I cannot communicate my knowledge to others.

3.01. See 2.01.

3.1. The news of my journey to Andromeda could not be entirely suppressed.

3.11. Nothing reached the news media, however, but in scientific circles, thanks to certain scientists "close to the military organizations" and with divided loyalties, the story soon appeared to be common property.

3.12. Consequently I was visited by, and received letters from scientists concerned with the hole, who wished to obtain scientific information about it. To their obviously enormous disappointment I persisted in answering/writing that my journey didn't have a scientific purpose, and (somewhat un-

truthfully) that I didn't have much scientific training, anyway, and, finally:

3.121. See 2.4. There's nothing there. After all:

3.1211. See 1.

Appendix

For the use of serious students of speculative fiction, literature classes, college science fiction courses, etc.

The numbered paragraphs of this Appendix (with the exception of 0.1. and 0.2.) correspond to the numbered paragraphs in the story *Gorgias*. Bold numerals that occur within the text of this Appendix also relate to the paragraph-numbering in *Gorgias*. However, bold numerals in the following text that are prefixed "A" relate to correspondingly-numbered paragraphs of the Appendix itself.

0.1. The title *Gorgias*. Gorgias was a pre-socratic, Greek philosopher of the Sophist tradition, who, among other things, said words to this effect:

i. Nothing is.

ii. If something is, I cannot know about it.

iii. If I know something, I cannot tell others about it.

Exercises: 1. Look up "Sophist" in an encyclopaedia.

2. Now consider why the story is called *Gorgias*.

3. Cf i, ii and iii, with 1, 2 and 3, respectively.

0.2. The form. The hierarchic principle of enumeration of the paragraphs is adopted from Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. This work is hereafter referred to as *TRACTATUS*.

Exercises: 1. Read *Tractatus*.

2. Read it again.

3. Cf the formulations of 2 and 3 with *Tractatus* 1.

4. There is a thought behind the form. What thought?

(Hint: compare the conclusion of *Gorgias* with the conclusion of *Tractatus*.)

1.023. Exercise: Study astronomy.

1.1. Exercise: Look up "Solipsism".

1.111. See A0.1.

2.01. Cf statement of the logical form: "Something has the property N, and I know this something."

The existential nature of this statement is rendered more clearly in the language of formal logic: $(\text{Ex}) ((\text{Nx}) \& (\text{iKx}))$.

Exercises: 1. Read an elementary formal logic textbook.

2. Cf 2.4. and 2.5.

2.1. Exercise: Read a number of trivial sf books.

2.22. Exercise: Read an elementary quantum theory textbook.

2.2311. One cannot construct a total order on the complex numbers.

Exercises: 1. Read a number of elementary mathematics textbooks on the different branches of mathematics. (Common for A2.2311., A2.2312., A2.23121. and A2.23131.)

2. Define a set of numbers, which behave largely like the complex numbers, but on which a total order can be constructed, and prove that this set is a field.

2.2312. An n -dimensional matrix is, since ordinary matrices are of the form m/n , of the form $m_1/m_2 \dots ./m_j/. \dots ./m_n$, $n \geq 2$.

2.23121. N -dimensional matrices would seem to lead to super-dimensions.

2.23131. A transcendental number is a number that is not algebraic.

2.23132. The fact that the prominent senior lecturer is from Cambridge is funny.

Exercise: Why? (Hint: search for the answer in the field of cosmology.)

2.24. Note the sub-subordinate clause in the last line of the paragraph.

Cf the last word of the paragraph with A0.1.

2.3. Exercise: Which was the minutest detail down to which everything was checked?

2.312. Omar Khayyam, when he was not a poet, was a mathematician.

2.31211. Read a few more trivial sf books where the protagonist, in the course of his spacetroting, traverses that ingenious realm commonly known as hyper-space.

2.4. Cf 2.01. and 2.2.

2.41. One parsec is the distance to a star that has as its maximum parallax during the year $1''$.

Exercise: Given the above, how much is 90 parsec?

2.42. Polarisation is an orthogonal process, which implies that the n -dimensional matrix (See 2.231.) is in at least one dimension orthogonal.

Exercises: 1. Why?

2. Compute in which direction it is at least orthogonal.

2.5. The dragon is an ancient Chinese symbol of wisdom.

Cf 2.01., 2.2. and 2.4.

Cf *Tractatus* 6.41.

2.51. Cf 2.5.

Cf *Tractatus* 6.41., *Tractatus* 6.4311., *Tractatus* 6.4312. and *Tractatus* 6.522.

Exercise: Look up "Meta-sophic".

2.6. Cf *Tractatus* 6.43., particularly the last sentence.

2.7. See A2.1.

2.8001. Exercise: Propose a solution to the problem of how one resident nurse is to cope with 153 spacemen that you could tell to your mother without blushing. (This exercise is especially suited for group study.)

2.801. Two spaces, which are isomorphic, mathematically, metaphysically or otherwise, are, more or less, the same. They differ mainly in the names you give them.

3. Cf A0.1. (iii).

Cf *Tractatus* 6.521. and *Tractatus* 7.

3.12. Cf *Tractatus* 6.52., *Tractatus* 6.521., *Tractatus* 6.53., *Tractatus* 6.54. and *Tractatus* 7.

BELLA GOES TO THE DARK TOWER

HILARY BAILEY

Bella came to the dark tower where her lover lay imprisoned by the enchanter.

Standing on the bare, cold hillside, lashed by blasts of wind, drenched by the spears of cold rain she thought, "Oh, my love, for the sake of a million nights of flesh, for the sake of our two cries in the night, I will save you. I will bring you back with me. Oh, I will bring you out from the dark tower. I will bring you home with me, oh love."

And her long blonde hair coiled from side to side, whipped by the gusts of wind as she stood on the dark hill, wrapped in her drenched cloak. Her heart ached in her as if it were made of solid lead, it throbbed in her chest like the engine of a great machine.

The hill was black. The sky was dark and black clouds blew and scudded dizzyingly above her. Her feet grew wet in the long grass, as dark beneath her feet as the skies, dark as the few clumps of bushes on the hill, the sparse trees on the skyline.

And high on top of the hill stood the tower, black obsidian, marble cold and high. There were no windows, only the smooth surface of the walls stretching up into the cloud-torn sky.

Weeping, she started up the hillside until she came to the tower. She circled the smooth, dripping walls until she came to the door, wooden, thick and heavy, studded with big, bronze nails. She knocked and knocked, bruising her cold knuckles on the hard, wet wood.

The door opened.

Bella stepped back in fear. There stood a dwarf, dark, lowering and hump-backed, dressed all in bright red.

"Come in, Bella," he said in a harsh whisper.

Very slowly she stepped into the vast hall. It was tiled in huge black and white marble squares. All around were strange figures, carved in white marble—men, women and animals in grotesque, distorted positions, bent double under heavy loads, stretching for impossible objects out of reach, fighting, coupling, straining and tensing. At the end of the hall a fire burned in a large fireplace covering most of the wall. On either side of the fire lay two tan-coloured hounds, with their great legs stuck out in front of them and huge tongues lolling.

"Come closer to the fire," whispered the dwarf. "You must be cold."

He walked, limping, ahead of her toward the fire. Bella followed slowly after, shivering with cold and fear.

As she approached the two hounds opened their eyes. Bella stopped. But they regarded her for a moment, flapped their great tails on the floor, and slept again.

"Sit down," whispered the dwarf. "I want to talk to you."

So Bella sat down in a wooden chair on one side of the fireplace. The dwarf hobbled to a table and poured wine awkwardly. He brought her some. Then he sat down on the other side of the fire and leaned forward toward her, staring at her closely.

"So you want your lover?" he croaked.

Bella glanced about her in fear, expecting at any moment that the cruel enchanter would appear. "Yes, I do," she said in a low voice.

"Why do you want him?" asked the dwarf.

"For his love," Bella said.

"How is his love?" whispered the dwarf.

"Warm and kind and consoling," said Bella. "Like pulling a soft blanket around you on a cold night. Like the just advice of the old and wise. Like the peaceful sleep of children."

The dwarf looked at her and shook his head. "Then I think he will stay in his tower," he said.

"Why? Will the enchanter not release him?" cried Bella.

There was a silence. The red-clothed dwarf sat shaking his head toward his crooked shoulder. "Go and see. Find him."

He pushed her toward a metal door set in the wall. "Turn the knob and go on," he said.

One hand on the doorknob, Bella heard his crippled feet pat-

tering away across the checkered floor. Tremulously she opened the door.

In a white-painted room, floodlit and glittering, stood a steel maze, so high she could not see the top of it, ending in the brilliance of the lighting overhead.

Bella walked, sighing and fearful into the maze, whispering, "For my love." She stumbled along, dragging her hands along the smooth bright walls which hemmed her in. As she walked she mumbled, "Soon I will meet the terrible enchanter. He will kill me. Oh, my love, my comfort, I will bring you home."

She came through the glittering maze into a round dark stairwell. There was no door in the stairwell. A narrow flight of stairs led upward, the steps made of cracked concrete, the handrail rusty and broken. The staircase spiralled upwards as far as she could see. The walls beside the stairs were painted dark green. They were cracked and running with moisture.

Bella began to climb with the dirty hems of her skirt and cloak dragging up the dusty stairs behind her. Up and up she went until her knees and ankles hurt like fire and she was gasping for breath. If she looked down, the spiralling drop of the stairs made her head spin. Looking up she saw nothing but more flights on flights to be climbed.

She said, "I am doing it for my love, for his comfort and his wisdom, for his support, for the straight bones of his body, for his hands in the dark night. And when I have saved him he will love me more."

And so she climbed, and the stairs narrowed, and became more cracked and dangerous.

She said, "I cannot go back for there may be dangers below. But the enchanter is certainly above me. But I cannot go back. I am doing it for my love."

"What love is this?" came a vast voice from above. Bella, terrified, clutched at the handrail.

"What love is this, I ask?" the voice boomed again.

In a trembling voice Bella said, "My love for my lover, for his strength and support, his firm hands and flesh. I would rather die than live without him."

Deep laughter came booming round the stairwell, rolling and echoing as it bounced against the walls.

Bella stood, dizzy, on the narrow stairs, her ears buzzing with the noise.

"What does this mean?" she murmured.

"Come and find your lover then," the voice boomed again and as Bella began to drag herself up the stairs the great laugh

rolled about her coming and going like a feverish nightmare.

And suddenly she was in a vast room, flooded with light from the huge windows all round.

Music bounced from wall to wall.

Lying there on a great, red bed was her lover, fast asleep.

"My love!" cried Bella, running to him and casting herself on his body.

He sat up with a cry of horror. Bella, thrown aside, gazed down at him. He stared at her with dislike. She stared into his eyes, malicious in his strong, handsome face.

She gave a moan. "My love, my love," she said.

The great laugh came again filling the vast, light room.

"Come with me," she beseeched, putting her small, soft hands on his shoulders. "You are enchanted. For God's sake come back with me."

A look of insufferable pride came over his face. "Back to you, you soul-drinker?" he said. "Are you mad?"

"But what do you mean?" Bella groaned. "What can you mean? Think, remember—"

"I remember," said her lover, and his face was as hard and frozen as a devil's. "I remember. I remember my service to you—the arms you weakened, the blood of mine you drank, the heart you gangrened and the soul you sucked from my body."

"You are enchanted," cried Bella. "Can you not see this? Come with me, break the power of the enchanter, come home. Come home!"

The laugh came again.

Through it Bella's lover said, "There is no enchanter, only this room."

She took him in her strong slender arms but he threw her away from him. She fell to the floor, weeping. "Come home, come home," she sobbed. "I shall kill myself. I shall hang myself from the beam of our fireplace. Come home, my love, come home."

He gave a desperate cry and ran across the room to a door. He flung it open and ran off down the white corridor which lay beyond.

AN UNPLEASANT END

SCOTT EDELSTEIN

To: Editor

IRREGULAR STORIES OF UNYIELDING SCIENCE

Dear sir,

Have I got a story for you!

Yes, I know that's what every author says, but this time I really *mean it*.

My story probes the depths of human existence through a number of fascinating characters which (as you will discover when you read the story) symbolize such Eternal concepts as Love, Death, and Man's Inhumanity To Man.

The story is called "Doctor Decay's Death Virus". It centres around an evil, deranged scientist who develops a chemical which turns human beings into living heaps of manure. Since I am a Topflight biochemist myself, I have been able to include over twenty-five pages of hard science in the story, explaining the strange and mysterious properties of the aforementioned chemical.

"Doctor Decay's Death Virus" will amaze and astound all who read it. I showed the story to some of my friends at the lab and they all agreed that it was comparable to the very best of Sanford Kvass' *SCRBLZ!* stories.

I am enclosing the story at this time for your perusal. I am also enclosing a reference from Mark Stickley, a local fan and one of my best friends, which will vouch for my honesty and show you that I have not done any plagiarization in my story.

Normally one should enclose return postage, I know, but I have high hopes for this story, so return postage should not be necessary if you buy it,

Thank you for listening. Here's hoping that "Doctor Decay's Death Virus" will someday make us both notoriously famous.

Sincerely,
Morton Post

To: Editor

IRREGULAR STORIES OF UNYIELDING SCIENCE

Dear Sir,

I submitted a story to you entitled "Doctor Decay's Death Virus" ten days ago. You will recall that the story involves a sudden fecal matter disposal crisis and a neurotic scientist with an anal fixation.

I still have not heard from you about the story. I hope nothing is wrong, such as a death in the family or a collapsed lung. Perhaps it is simply that it takes several days to process stories. I hope this is the case.

Regardless of all the above factors, I am still waiting patiently for your reply and hope to hear from you within the next day or two.

Sincerely,
Morton Post

To: Editor

IRREGULAR STORIES OF UNYIELDING SCIENCE

Sir,

It has now been three weeks and I have still received no word on my story, "Doctor Decay's Death Virus". You will remember that the story examined the argument of whether flushing a toilet can become a matter of murder in the first degree.

I am sure that you can understand that three weeks is a long time to wait. I do not know, but I will bet that people like Sanford Kvass do not have to wait this long.

In any case, I do not mean to bother you by any means and still wait patiently for some word from you, and would sincerely appreciate a reply within the next few days.

Some people at the lab have started a rumor that editors do not really read the stories that are submitted to them. They say that editors use the stories as toilet paper. I sincerely hope that this is not true in your case.

Respectfully,
Morton Post

IRREGULAR STORIES OF UNYIELDING SCIENCE

Stephen Boyer, Assistant Editor

To: Charlie Fischer

Dear Charlie,

Did you notice the letterhead on this stationery? Yup, I am now the official Assistant Editor of *Irregular Stories*, that magazine I have loved since I was a child. I knew playing up to the editor at science fiction conventions would pay off.

This is my first day on the job, and I must tell you frankly that it isn't all it's cracked up to be. When Fred Benjamin first gave me the job, I expected to wind up sitting behind a big, polished mahogany desk, with dozens of actual original manuscripts by all the big authors right in front of me. Sadly, my fannish dream has been shattered. My job consists of sweeping floors, sharpening pencils, and in general keeping the office tidy. Not that I'm complaining. Although in the office Fred Benjamin isn't the kindly old man that you see at conventions. Right now Fred has a pretty bad case of diarrhoea, and I can't exactly say he's taking it with good humor. My Ghod, the man has been running back and forth to the bathroom all day, screaming like he's being attacked by something from the planet Scrbz. He's been falling behind in reading manuscripts, too, so he's been grabbing piles of them every time he has to run to the bathroom. I suppose he reads them while he's on the can. (That's how I can write this letter, by the way; he's sitting on the pot now so he can't yell at me for not cleaning up.)

Just as I wrote that last sentence, Fred started shrieking again. It sounds like he's really in pain. He's still screaming. And it's getting louder and louder. Wait a minute, I just heard a heavy object fall, I'd better go check on him.

My Ghod, Charlie, I just checked and you wouldn't believe it. Brace yourself, and be sure to put this item in the next issue of your newszine. And extend my subscription accordingly. Okay, here it is: Frederick Benjamin, long-time editor of *Irregular Stories*, is *dead*. I'm not sure how or why, but when I walked into the bathroom, he was sprawled on the floor, clutching a bunch of papers he had used to wipe his ass with. I looked closely, and—get this, Charlie—he wasn't using toilet paper, he'd been using a story. Guess I forgot to replace the toilet paper.

I guess I'll have to call the police. But first I'll have to notify all the fanzine editors I can.

Best,
Steve

To: Editor

IRREGULAR STORIES OF UNYIELDING SCIENCE

Sir,

I have now been patiently waiting over a month for a reply. While I realize that editors are busy men, I do not feel that your making me wait this long is entirely fair. Perhaps you have simply lost the manuscript.

No matter which of the above are true, I am afraid that I can wait no longer. I am withdrawing my story, "Doctor Decay's Death Virus" from your consideration. Under no circumstances may it appear in *Irregular Stories*. I am sending the story to *Unfamiliar Tales* instead.

One last thing—I hope my use of the word "hell" in the story is not what put you off. You could always print "h—" if you want to, or even "—".

Sincerely,
Morton Post

P.S. In the unlikely event that you do indeed use as toilet paper the stories which are submitted to you, I took the precaution to treat the paper on which my story was typed with a special strain of bacteria that I developed in my own biochemical laboratory. The diet of these bacteria consists of human faeces and certain human internal organs. These bacteria are quite harmless under most conditions and remain dormant until they are fed. Upon contact with a soiled anus, however, the bacteria multiply at a fantastic rate, rushing up the victim's anus and devouring both his small and large intestines in a matter of seconds. (Respectfully, M.P.)

A CLEAR DAY IN THE MOTOR CITY

ELEANOR ARNASON

The power station had eight smoke stacks, which were called the Seven Sisters. The rule was, if the Seven Sisters were visible from the roof of the office building where she worked the bosses declared a clear air holiday.

This particular day only half of her department came in. The others had gotten up and looked out at the morning sky, said, "It's going to be a clear air holiday," and got out their beach clothes instead of their office clothes. The people who did come in stood around talking about what they were going to do after they were let out. A little before nine the P.A. system told everyone to proceed to the roof. Up they all went. As everyone had expected, they could see the Seven Sisters upriver and the factories downriver, whose many smoke stacks released grey, brown, yellow and pink smoke into the perfectly transparent air. The bosses came up after the rest of them. They had wreaths of plastic oak leaves on their heads, and the company president carried a cage with a pigeon in it. He said, "We send this bird to whoever's responsible for the weather, to bear our thanks to him, her, it or them." He opened the cage. The pigeon stayed put till he shook the cage and said, "Shoo". Then it took off.

After that, they hurried down to clear off their desks and pick up their coats. As she went down the stairs she wondered what it had been like before the psychopharmacologists had discovered fidazene and the Age of Belief had begun. Going past the fifth and fourth floors, at the moment unrented, dark and silent, she tried to imagine a world full of people to whom

nothing was certain. But such a world was inconceivable. When she reached the second floor, where her department was, she gave up trying to imagine it. She got to her desk and the girl who sat next to her said, "I'll bet that was a homing pigeon. It probably goes back to his house, and he saves the cost of a new pigeon the next time there's a clear day."

"The weather gods must like that a lot," she said, "but you're probably right."

She and Daisy, who was Canadian but worked in Detroit, went across the street to the restaurant on top of the gas building. The streets were already full of people. When the Seven Sisters were visible every business downtown let its employees out. They reached the restaurant ahead of the crowd and got a table beside a window, ordered Golden Cadillacs and looked out at the Detroit River and Canada on the other side of it. It was so clear, she thought, that she could almost see the individual leaves on the Canadian trees. There wasn't a cloud in sight. Soon the river was full of sailboats and cabin cruisers. A fireboat moved slowly upriver, sending great fountains of water into the air. Two barges decked with flags and bunting moved out into the river, one from the American shore and one from the Canadian. They stopped side by side at the river's center. They were too far away for her to see what was going on. She found out later from the evening paper that the mayors of Detroit and Windsor, Ontario had been out on the barges, performing ceremonies of thanksgiving and friendship, the chief of which was releasing two sacred carp into the river while bands played and a chorus of castratti sang "America the Beautiful" and "O Canada".

She drank three Golden Cadillacs and got a pretty good buzz going. Daisy said she had to go home. Canada didn't celebrate clear air days, which meant she'd have her house to herself till five, since her mother who worked in Windsor would be at work. When you live with someone, Daisy said, you appreciate being home alone.

She stayed on a while after Daisy left and had another Golden Cadillac, then went down and caught a Woodward bus. The bus was packed, and it moved slowly, since the streets were full of people. There were a couple of monks in the back, one a saffron-robed Buddhist, the other a painted and perfumed, scarlet-robed devotee of one of the middle eastern fertility gods, probably Christ-Adonis. The Buddhist had a couple of pairs of finger cymbals. The other monk had a glockenspiel. They started playing their instruments and after

a while people started singing: "Give Peace a Chance", then "O Happy Day", then "Under the Bo Tree", while the bus moved slowly up Woodward Avenue.

When the bus got to the Caniff change the guys from the Plymouth plant got on, sweaty and happy and full of booze. One of them had a piece of red cloth, which he waved out the window. They started singing "The Workers' Flag is Deepest Red", first the workers, then everyone on the bus, even the monks. More factory workers got on in front of the Ford Highland Park plant. They finished "The Workers' Flag" and started on "Solidarity Forever". She got off at Six Mile Road, waving farewell to the monks and clerks and blue collar workers, all singing like crazy.

Walking down Six Mile, she passed three small black girls playing with plastic yarrow stalks and felt suddenly nostalgic. How well she could remember her childhood possessions: yarrow stalks and ouija boards and toy birds whose plastic entrails foretold only happy futures.

She stopped at the Biff's restaurant on Six Mile for a glass of milk with which to wash down her midday capsule of fidazene. Otherwise a panacea, fidazene had one small defect: it tended to upset the stomach, and it was a good idea to take milk with it. There were a few people whose stomachs got so upset that they couldn't keep fidazene down. Some of these mainlined the stuff, but most simply did without. Doubters, as these unfortunates were called, were classified as hopelessly handicapped and given the right to ride free on all forms of public transport and to beg in front of all churches, synagogues and temples. They were usually easy to spot: their brows were lined and they didn't smile much. Their eyes moved continually back and forth, looking for they knew not what.

She paid for the milk and decided to walk around Palmer Park. The sky was still entirely cloudless. At the horizon it was pale blue instead of its usual brown and overhead it was a deep, intense blue, the color of the mosques in Isfahan and Samarkand. Going along the Woodward side of the park, she passed two temple harlots, off for the day, walking hand in hand and joking together. A gypsy fortune teller had set up her table beside the tennis courts and was dealing out greasy tarot cards. The gypsy's gold rings and earrings glittered in the sunlight, as did her gold teeth when she grinned.

Further on there was a Good Humor truck. She bought a strawberry-shortcake-flavoured Good Humor covered with nuts and ate it as she walked around the north end of the park, past

the public golf course. It was packed with golfers, all wearing enormous, inflated plastic phalluses to attract the favourable notice of the game's patron gods, who were all of them gods of the woods and meadows like Freyr and Pan. She stopped for several minutes and watched a beginner who was having terrible trouble with his phallus. He'd tuck it between his legs, then every time he began to swing, out it would pop and get in the way of his arms as he brought his club down. All this was good for a chuckle or two. Finally, however, he looked around and saw her watching him, and she moved on.

She finished her Good Humor and tossed the stick into a litter can, then started down the west side of the park. There was a little winding street there, hidden behind a row of trees. All along the street there were big houses with wide, smooth, green lawns. She always enjoyed looking at rich people's houses. There was something holy about them. They were so clean and calm and they seemed so assured. They sat along the street like a row of bodhisattvas.

She walked slowly down the street. Toward the end of it was a house that was for sale. The lawn was dry with brown patches in it and the curtainless windows opened in on empty rooms. Suddenly curious, she didn't know why, she went across the lawn and up onto the terrace in front of the house. There was a ballustrade around the terrace. Last fall's leaves were still piled into the ballustrade's corners and what looked like a heap of rags lay against the house wall. As she came onto the terrace, the heap moved, turning into a huddled man, who stretched and sat up. He was a doubter. She recognized the signs: the lined face and the shifting eyes. "Alms," he said and held out his hand, which was bony and none too clean. "Have pity, lady, I have an over-active thyroid." He pulled his shirt away from his neck so she could see how the thyroid glands bulged out on either side of it. "It's because I'm nervous, lady, because I don't believe in anything. That's what the doctors said. I wouldn't have it if I could stomach fidazene."

He was, she realized, the same age as she was, more or less. For some reason this horrified her.

"I get terrible depressions, too, lady," the doubter went on. "Nothing seems to mean anything. Lady, you don't know how bad it is."

She fumbled in her purse till she found some change, put it in his hand and hurried away. He called after her, "I'd say God bless you, lady, but I don't believe in God."

She kept on, making no reply, and didn't slow down till she

was a block away, back at Six Mile. She stopped then and stared up at the sky till she felt less upset.

The day continued clear. The wind decreased till the cool air barely moved. The afternoon shadows seemed to have sharper edges than was usual, and the trees' foliage looked hard and solid. The sky seemed solid too, like a blue crystal bowl covering the world. She went up to the delicatessen opposite Marygrove College for lunch: hot pastrami on rye, coffee and a piece of cheesecake. She felt restless and uneasy, probably because of her encounter with the doubter, and had a second piece of cheesecake to calm herself. After that she decided, for want of anything better to do, to go downtown in the evening to see the holiday fireworks. She went home and put on new clothes: a white blouse, a blue midi-skirt with little mirrors sewn on it, silver candles and a silver mask. There'd be dancing in the streets, she knew, to the sound of the civic rock band. Many of the dancers would be masked and some would be elaborately costumed. She took a bus back down Woodward to a dinner in Greek Town: squid in wine sauce, a salad, milk and her evening capsule of fizadene. By the time she was done, it was eight thirty and the sun was setting. She walked over to Kennedy Square, thinking the only defect in clear days was their sunrises and sunsets, which were pretty uninteresting, nothing more than a band of pink light at the horizon. For a really good sunrise or sunset it was necessary to have clouds and a fair amount of pollution. Well, she told herself, that goes to show that nothing is perfect, not even a clear day.

In Kennedy Square the rock band was already playing, and the fountain was gushing out apple wine instead of water. There were a thousand people or more there, dancing or standing around drinking wine in paper cups. She pushed through the people to the paper cup table, got a cup with DETROIT—LOVE IT OR LEAVE IT printed on it and filled the cup with wine from the fountain. On her way back from the fountain she bumped into a man in a black and silver harlequin costume, who turned and looked at her, his eyes glittering through the eyeholes in his black satin mask. "Sweetheart," he said. "Let's dance."

Dance they did, then drank wine, then danced again. At ten the display of fireworks began. The dancers—by this time there were several thousand—trooped down to the Detroit River to see it. Hand in hand with the harlequin she watched rockets explode above the dark river, expanding like fiery blossoms opening. When the fireworks were over they danced again.

At midnight the mayor arrived, virgins in white going before him, some scattering flowers, some bearing torches. After the mayor came his bodyguard, cops dressed in black leather and steel, guns at their hips and clubs in their hands. The mayor took his place on the platform above the apple wine fountain. One by one the local heads of all the major religions joined him, while the band played and the dancers applauded. In a black car from Wayne County Jail came the sacrifice. The music stopped and a drum roll began. Spotlights came on in the Campus Martius across the street from Kennedy Square. There was a temporary altar there and beside the altar stood the sacrificer, dressed all in black, a black hood covering his head.

This was the part she didn't like. She grabbed hold of the harlequin's hand and held onto it tightly, while the sacrifice was led to the altar and stretched out on it and tied down. The sacrifice seemed awfully calm, considering his situation. Someone had told her that they were all heavily drugged.

The sacrificer unbuttoned the sacrificer's shirt, baring his chest, then took a knife and cut into the sacrifice under the ribs—at that point the sacrifice screamed—and cut out the sacrifice's heart. He held the heart up with bloody hands so all could see it. Then the spotlights went out and once again the band began to play.

She shuddered and looked at the harlequin. He smiled and took off his mask. His face was deeply lined and his bright eyes, she noticed now, were always shifting, looking first here then there. He was the doubter she'd met at the empty house.

"You!" she cried, then asked, "who are you?"

"I'm the Doubter King, sweetheart," he said, "whom you believers doubt exists. You did me a good turn today. This is to pay you back." He bent and kissed her on the lips, then turned and pushed his way through the crowd. She was too startled to do anything except watch him till he was out of sight. When she could no longer see his narrow, bony, black and silver back, she wiped her lips with her hand. Then she walked to the Hotel Pontchatrain and took a cab home from there.

The next morning when she took her fidazene capsule, she threw up.

THERE IS NO MORE AWAY

STEVE CLINE

The family sat at the table, eating. There were nine of them: Father, Mother, three sons (Jim, Billy, and Johnny) and four daughters (Jane, Susan, Mary Jo, and Sally). The table was heaped with food: a large juicy roast beef, several different kinds of vegetables, many loaves of bread, a few mangled ham bones, here and there the pieces of a chicken carcass, and pitchers of liquid.

"Billy," said Father. "Get us another ham."

Billy got up from the table and went to the chute that protruded from one wall, nibbling a chicken leg as he walked. Underneath the chute was a keyboard of about fifty buttons. Billy punched out a combination and waited.

The room in which the family was eating was their home. Across its center hung a curtain, behind which the space was subdivided into smaller sleeping sections, one for Mother and Father, one for the sons, and one for the daughters. The large table sat in the middle of the other half. On one wall was the chute, in another was a door. The third wall was blank.

A light on the door of the chute lit up. Billy opened it, took out a steaming ham, and returned to the table. Immediately the family began to cut and hack away at the ham, stuffing large pieces into their mouths. Father tipped a pitcher to his lips, and red liquid ran down over his chin and onto his shirt.

"More drink," he said to a daughter, who went to the chute.

"Get me some more dessert, too," said Sally, the youngest daughter.

The banquet continued. Johnny, the youngest of all the children, reached for a pitcher but knocked it over. Orange liquid belched forth, quickly staining the tablecloth and dripping over

the edge of the table onto his lap. He began to whine. "Mommy, it's getting on me."

Mother got out of her chair and went around the table to help her son. She shoved his chair to the side so that the drink would spill straight onto the floor, and then returned to her eating. Slowly, an orange puddle grew on the floor amid other stains from spilled drinks, bits of bread and meat, and slippery smears of fat and grease.

Jane got up from the table.

"You going next door?" her father asked.

"Yes, I'm getting awfully full."

"Get a bag and take some of this garbage with you," he said, gesturing to the table.

Jane went to the chute and punched some buttons. In a moment she withdrew a plastic bag. Back at the table she crammed bones, plates, scraps of food, pitchers and everything else that was not in use into the bag. When the bag was full she carried it to the door and left the room with it.

The corridor outside faded into perspective in both directions. Spaced regularly on both sides were doors, all identical. The corridor itself was full of people, two streams flowing in opposite directions. Some were on foot but many rode bicycles or carts. Every twenty doors there was a cross corridor, and where the corridors met there were traffic jams.

Jane made her way to the nearest door. She opened it and darted in quickly. Inside she started to breathe in short gasps; the air was heavy with putrescent odors. She almost retched. No matter how many times she came here she couldn't get used to the smell.

She flipped on the lights. The room was the same as the one she had left except that it had no table or dividing curtains. At the back, filling up about a quarter of the space, was a large pile of refuse. She walked to it quickly and threw the bag of garbage up to the top of the pile. Then, leaning over the base of the mound, Jane stuck two fingers down her throat and vomited twice, throwing up pieces of ham and chicken and small bits of green and yellow in a purple-red liquid that splattered against the pile.

When she had emptied her stomach she turned back to the door. As she opened it, Johnny came down the corridor.

"Don't turn out the light," he told her. "I have to go to the bathroom."

She held the door open for him and closed it after he was in the room. She returned to her home and sat down at the

table. The family was digging into a three-layered chocolate cake that had just come from the chute. She cut herself an extra large piece.

"Father," said Mother, "just look at this place."

Father stuffed the rest of his piece of cake into his mouth and looked about.

"Hmfmh grmm ba," he said.

"I think we should move. Look at that floor. It's a mess."

"Tinksa," Father said, getting some of the cake swallowed.

"Yes I do. We haven't moved for over four months. I think it's about time we had a change."

Father got the rest of the cake down and said, "If you want to, dear. It really doesn't matter to me."

"Oh, can we Mother, can we?" asked little Sally in excitement. "It was so much fun last time."

"Oh, all right, we'll move," said Father. "This neighbourhood is getting overcrowded. Just two days ago the last empty room was taken."

"How soon will we go, dear?" asked Mother.

"Right now is fine with me."

"All right," she said, "then we have to get things organized around here."

"Jim, you help me put together a cart. Billy, you help Mother and your sisters put our stuff next door," said Father.

"But why bother to shift everything?"

"Don't give me any backtalk. We're respectable people; we don't leave our belongings around for other folk to clean up. The people who will be here next can get whatever they want from the chute, so why should they want used furniture?"

Billy shrugged and went to help Mother and the daughters take the table, beds, curtains, dressers, clothes, and everything else to the room next door. Meanwhile, Father and Jim were at the chute, punching buttons and pulling out pieces of plastic and steel. As the others slowly emptied the room, the two of them began putting together a cart.

By the time the room was barren the cart was complete. It was driven by a two-seat bicycle attached at the front. When the family were ready, they loaded the cart with food from the chute and took it outside into the corridor. Father and Jim began pedaling, towing the rest of the family in the cart with the food supply.

The corridor was crowded. There were people walking and many other carts with parents and children in them.

Every twenty doors the family crossed another corridor, each one running off to infinity either side.

In the cart, Mother and the daughters and sons were eating. Up front Father steered with one hand and held a leg of turkey in the other; Billy held a hunk of meat in one hand and a pitcher in the other.

They traveled for half an hour in the same direction, and then turned down one of the cross corridors, staying on it for an equal length of time.

"Hey, Father," said Jim, "it doesn't look like it's getting any less crowded."

"No, it doesn't. We'd better stop and ask." He jumped down from his seat and knocked at the nearest door. It opened and a man appeared.

"Hello," said Father, "could you tell me if there are any empty rooms in this neighborhood?" Over the man's shoulder he could see a family at the table eating.

"No, haven't been for a good while."

"Okay, thank you."

Father got back on his seat and pedaled past the next intersection, into a new neighborhood, and asked again about empty rooms. There weren't any. He moved on and asked again. No rooms. Slowly the cart worked its way down the corridor, neighborhood to neighborhood, but there were no empty rooms anywhere.

They went on for an hour or more, switching corridors, taking perpendicular ones, then trying parallel ones, but all the rooms were full.

"Dear," called Mother from the cart, "would you please hurry and find us a room. Our food's almost gone, Johnny has to go to the bathroom, and I'm so full I can't eat another bite until I get a chance to vomit."

"I'm trying, Mother, but everything is occupied. I remember when I was a kid there would sometimes only be three or four rooms occupied in a whole neighborhood. Now look at it."

"Maybe we should just forget about moving and go back to our old room."

"Are you kidding? I'd never be able to find our way back there. I haven't been paying attention." Father stopped in front of another door. Tiredly he rapped on it. It opened.

"Hello," said Father, "do you know if there are any empty rooms nearby?"

"Yeah," said a man, "right next door." He motioned with his head. "A family moved in for about a week and then left a

couple days ago." The man came out into the hallway and led Father to the door. Some of his sons and daughters came out to look at the cart.

"I'm sure glad we found a place; we've been on the road for a couple of hours."

"It's getting crowded these days, I know. I spent several days scouting for a new room. Couldn't find one within an hour's journey from here, and I checked every neighborhood, systematically."

They were at the door and the man opened it. An unmistakable odor drifted from the darkness.

"What!" said the man and flipped on the light. In one corner was a small garbage heap. "So that's why they moved."

"Why?" asked Father.

"We double up on garbage rooms in this neighborhood."

"Double up? I've never heard of such a thing."

"Sure, everybody in the neighborhood has to, it's so crowded. But anyway, they probably couldn't find someone who wasn't already doubled up so they had to live with their own garbage. That's why they only stayed one week."

"What in the hell are we going to do?" said Father, shaking his head. "We've got to find some place."

"Tell you what," said the other man. "Why don't you stay here temporarily. You can clear this junk out and use my garbage room until you can find another place to stay."

"That sounds great. I'm sure we won't trouble you more than a day or so."

"Fine. Come on, I'll show you which is the garbage room."

Soon the family were settled into their new temporary home, able to gorge themselves in comfort once more.

The next day Father took the cart to look for rooms. He returned several hours later empty-handed. He went out the next day, and the next, and the next, but could find no rooms. Father decided the only way to find another room was to stay out a long time looking for it. It was impossible for the entire family to go along so only Jim went with him. Father, who had always been technically inclined, outfitted the cart with all sorts of plastic containers and bags to hold garbage and refuse. Then, after the cart was piled high with food, he and Jim left.

They returned three days later. No rooms. They rested a day then set out again but again returned without having come across an empty room. He and Jim kept it up for three weeks, covering thousands of neighborhoods without finding space.

"Mother," said Father at the table one time after he had re-

turned from a trip, "we were back in the old neighborhood this trip. Someone else has our old room. I'm worried. I don't think there are any more rooms, at least not close enough so the family could get there all together."

"We're comfortable here for the time being."

"Yes, but you've seen the garbage room. Now that there are three families using it, it's almost full. Another week or two and it will be full. Any day our neighbor could come over and tell us we can't use it anymore. Then we'd have to use this room until we finally couldn't stand it any longer. I don't think we could ever find another room. I don't think there are any more."

"What can we . . ."

There was a knock at the door. Father rose to answer it. It was their neighbor.

"I've come to talk to you about the garbage room."

"I know," said Father. "We can't use it any more; we're filling it up too fast."

"It's not that. Ours is filling up the fastest, true, but all the other rooms are about half full already. And now we know there are no rooms to move to, some families in the neighborhood are getting worried."

"What can I do?"

Susan passed between them on her way to vomit.

"Well, I've got an idea I'd like to discuss with you. Can I come in?"

"Sure. I'll make up another chair from the chute." He went to the chute, punched the keyboard, and it produced a folding chair.

"Okay, what's your idea?" he asked, placing the chair at the table.

"What's underneath this?" asked the neighbor, stomping his foot on the floor.

"Underneath it? Why, uh, nothing. I mean, there isn't anything underneath it. There can't be."

"You mean this floor goes on and on forever?"

"I don't know. I've never thought about it before."

"Think about it now. Is the floor so thick it goes on forever, or is it no thicker than the walls—a foot or two, maybe?"

"But if it's only a few feet thick that would mean there was something on the other side. What could it be?"

"I don't know, but if we could get through the floor, make a hole through it, we could dump our garbage there, every bit of it!"

Father thought for a minute, and then began nodding his head. "It might work, it just might. But how do we know if there is emptiness on the other side?"

"We don't. We can only try and see. That's where I need some help. How can we make a hole in the floor? It's pretty hard."

"We need something from the chute," said Father.

"Yeah, but I don't know a combination that would give us anything that could do that."

"I do," said Father, getting up and going to the chute. He punched the buttons and waited for the light to come on. When it did he pulled out a strange looking object. It had a wooden handle attached to a piece of steel that came to a point at either end.

"What's that?" asked the neighbor.

"It says *pick* on it. If I guess right, this is how you use it." Father was in one corner of the room now. He spread his legs wide and swung the pick over his head and down onto the hard surface of the floor. There was a metallic clang and bits of the floor scattered, hitting the walls. "It works," said Father, looking at the small nick in the floor.

So the hole was begun. Work went slowly. The family moved next door with their neighbors while work kept up on the hole incessantly. The whole neighborhood took turns working in shifts. Inch by inch the hole grew in the floor. Word of the hole spread to other neighborhoods and many of them began their own holes. A foot deep, then two, three, four feet into the floor went the hole, and still there was only more floor underneath. Picks were worn out and replaced. Days, then weeks passed and work never stopped.

As the hole slowly grew, one by one the garbage rooms became stuffed and families tripled and then quadrupled up. By the time the hole was down ten feet, the last garbage room was filled and people started putting their garbage into the corridor. Traffic stopped coming down it. One intersection became blocked by a pile of refuse. Then, at a depth of twelve feet, the hole broke through.

There was nothing below but blackness. As shifts brought in garbage and threw it down into the hole, people speculated as to what was down there.

First the corridors were cleared. Then one by one the garbage rooms were emptied. After the rooms were cleaned out they were washed down and people began moving into them. In a few days the neighborhood was again full, but this time there

was no need to worry about overfilling the garbage rooms. Two more holes were dug in other rooms, and those, with the original hole, were enough to take care of the entire neighborhood. The waiting lines were always short.

Several weeks later, while eating, Mother said, "Father, what's that noise?"

"What noise? I don't hear anything."

"Listen, it's a ticking noise."

Father asked for silence and listened. Yes, there was a slow tick, tick. It was very faint and distant. Father checked the chute but it wasn't coming from there.

"I don't know what it is Mother. Don't worry about it."

They began eating again.

The noise remained, however. A few weeks later it had grown in volume and had become a continual, nagging beat. It changed from a light pecking to a heavy thumping.

"Father, this noise is driving me crazy," Mother cried one night. "We've got to stop it."

"I know, it's been getting much louder lately," said Father.

That night, as the family slept, there was a shattering crash in the room. Father and Mother started out of their sleep.

"What happened?" asked Mother.

"I don't know."

"Mommy, mommy," cried Johnny, running into their sleeping room. "I'm scared."

"It's okay, dear," said Mother.

Father got up and went into the eating section. There was a shaft of light glancing down from a hole in the ceiling. In the cone of light he could see a small pile of rubble lying on top of the broken table. As he stood there watching, a bag of garbage fell down through the hole, landing and splitting open with a splat,

ORIGINS OF THE UNIVERSE

GWYNETH CRAVENS

Where It's At

The origins of the universe are important. That is why there are so many theories about its origins. Here are some of the theories:

Cosmic Egg Theory

Expanding Theory

Giant Atom Theory

Contracting Theory

Primeval Atom Theory

Oscillating Theory

Hot Thin Soup Theory

Redundancy Theory

Giant Egg Drop Soup Theory

Cold Treacle Theory

Rotating Cornish Pasty Theory

Alienation

Neutrinos virtually do not interact with matter.

My Confessions About the Red Shift

The street has twenty-three saplings and is not shady. For each brownstone, there are two garbage cans. Living in one apartment or another, in one building or another, on either side of the warp of asphalt (over its surface, two parallel lines can't help meeting), there are the Schwarzes, the MacDonalds, the Filers, the Diazes, the Wilsons, the Friedmans, the Pecks, who knows who else? Who wants to read mailbox labels all day? Not me! I am too busy forging my personal myth.

Grossegedanken ("Great Thoughts")

Physicists and mathematicians sometimes have "Great Thoughts". The greatness of the thought is usually linked to

the greatness of the man thinking it. If indeed we "think". The greatness of the thought is also linked to the fact that the great man is thinking about something very big, like the universe. Einstein had Grossegedanken about large things but, notably, never about small things. Once, at the age of sixteen, he was shaving and he had Grossegedanken that took ten years to work out.

Hot Trix in Nova Mix

People in these parts go to work between the hours of eight and ten in the morning. They are men or women. They wear shoes, socks or stockings, suits or dresses, coats, and go hatless or wear hats. Some carry attaché cases, some carry purses, some carry umbrellas, some carry newspapers, some carry parcels, some carry shopping bags. They walk on the sidewalks, except when they cross the street (that non-Euclidean surface). In the late afternoon or in the early evening, the people usually come home again, walking on the sidewalks or crossing the street, wearing and carrying much the same things that they wore and carried in the morning. I suspect that this is how it is with them. And is there not, in the balkanized or metaphysical landscape within each of these persons, a very old bathtub with copper encrustations, or a Barbra Streisand record?

That First Hot Half Hour...

I cut my toe while trimming a hangnail. Thus does inner pain become manifest, pain reflecting more biting pain, again and again, inward and outward, outward in ripples that ultimately engulf everything. Here and there, people are shuddering. They walk their dogs early in the morning, before the invisible steam hammers start up. "It takes a mighty big dog to weigh a ton," they like to say.

If the original ambiplasma contained equal parts of matter and antimatter, three kinds of regions should result: a realm of pure matter, a realm of pure antimatter, and a buffer zone. Regions of the same content throughout the universe would attract each other; those of the opposite content would be repelled. There appears to be a lot of agglomeration going on right now. Ambivalence is decreasing.

A Rate of Change in G Proportional to t^n (time being counted from the beginning of the expansion of the universe)

Two scientists are falling through space in an elevator. Someone from another elevator fires a rifle at them as they fall

through space. One scientist notes that the bullet hole on one side of the elevator is higher than the bullet hole on the other side of the elevator. The other scientist asks for a cigarette. The first scientist says, "Caution: Cigarette smoking is injurious to your health."

Big Bang and the Expanders

A rock group is rehearsing down the street, a rock group with ten 100-watt amplifiers. My hangnail twinges. Electrocutation by recognition! I realize, then, that pornography accelerated to a critical speed attains a mass identical to that of Velveeta.

It is a good thing time exists. Otherwise, we would have to do everything all at once.

A man is travelling at the speed of light and shaving. He is wondering if he will be able to see his image in the mirror. Does his razor work?

STANCE OF SPLENDOR

GEORGE ZEBROWSKI

They were two swimmers suspended in a perfectly clear sea, she moving on her back below him, limbs open freely, floating gently; he is a perfectly muscled body, sinewy fibers wrapped around bone in a strong grip.

He pushed down to her and grasped her head with both hands, and kissed her.

He saw himself with her, saw the small rings of water moving away from the intertwined bodies. The field of water was filled with light.

He held the water-filled globe in his hand, looking at it against the sheet of white light which was the sky, watching the figures turn slowly in the liquid, remembering.

"As I grew up," he told her, "I became afraid that I would be nothing, absolutely nobody. It was a terrible suspicion to have to live with."

"You'll get over it," she said and pulled his head down to hers. He kissed her reluctantly and she knew it.

"Look, I don't want to talk about it. I've heard it all before," he said.

The machine gun stitched across the bodies on the ground. He watched hands thrust forward from torsos, grasping. His own mouth was in the dirt and he felt the bullets rivet him to the earth.

She came to see him and he felt her eyes looking through the sheets. No arms, no legs. He was nothing.

Drown, sink down, rush out as light into the sea mud, surface into a fog of pain, space filled with white light.

Blink.

His eyes refused to roll down from inside his head. He groped

with dead, phantom limbs into the white space, trying to picture something dark and tangible to calm his fear of blindness. His eyes were made of polished marble set in the liquid of his head; nerves brushed gently against their stone surface, nerves of rigid ivory wire trying to pick up something to send backstage.

Blink.

He sensed the surface he was lying on. He pictured stucco set in squares. He tried to sit up, and could not. Inability became a dense, fearful mass in his stomach.

Blink. He closed his eyelids. The white light became a field of dull red covered with capillaries. Fear became a spreading glow reknitting the strands of his consciousness. He felt the raw, cut-off ends of his nerves trying to extend themselves into the absent flesh.

They had said, "We're going to reinforce the matrix of your individuality, the craggy-lightning pattern of your nervous system buried deeply in your flesh, the neural connections of your brain and spine, until the whole is charged enough to stand by itself . . ."

Without flesh. They had shown him a three dimensional holographic image of a nervous system and brain pattern standing in a display tank—an infinitely delicate skeleton tracing in white light, standing naked, fleshless, boneless, a pattern of energy looped back on itself.

Life after death. Immortality.

A man dies and becomes like a ruined house. The beams fall in, the insides begin to rot, and the walls let in the light and wind. The intensely alive man, they had said, one of upward spiraling, extreme lifelong consciousness, reaches a point when the design of his brain and nervous system is strong enough to do without the generating engine of the body to sustain the epiphenomenal field of personality and awareness. His life must be a rush toward greater and more complex awareness, until he is transfigured into a self sustaining being. They had compared the emergence of trans-man with that moment when sub-man had first groped after consciousness, and had become man.

We are going to do this in a lab, they had said.

He had wondered of the dissolute men, who believe little and reason scarce at all. They get nothing when their bodies dissolve, taking the partially formed permanence of their mind and nervous system with them into the dark.

Then he had passed through the laboratory floor, through

the asbestos and tile and foundation and granite rock into the magma-warmth inside the earth, where the heat nourished him. Perception became direct, lacking the distortion of perceiver and object, the imperfection of sense and interpretation which sees the cosmos through the wrong end of time as some shadow play on a basement wall.

The sun's radiance streamed through the earth, a standing gravito-magnetic wave front.

He shrugged, shifting the earth's crust around him, and he knew that he had filled up the earth with himself. How would she understand him now, he thought, how could she continue to love him? He had hung ghostly near the physical tracings, the scratches in time-space and matter which had been his body in the apparatus; and they had not been able to see him to know they had succeeded.

His body had thrashed about, empty eyes open.

"Hopelessly mad." Their uncomprehending masks spoke the words.

A thin whisper of atmosphere at his outer edge: weather. He felt the tidal bulge rush closely along the ocean bottom, slowly shaping it . . . passing.

Pulse. Blink.

It became colder as he drained the planet of energy and was left with the light and tide of the star and mood to feed him.

Blink. He pulsed the field of the earth as it grew colder, moved the planet with a shrug, wrinkled its skin with a whisper of his will—

—and rolled it into the sun like a ball down a smooth incline, blinking its field on and off, in a long curve which took him into the center, shedding the earth long before he reached it. He filled the sun and it did not drain, continuing its output unfailingly . . .

She was gone now too; and there were no others like him anywhere near. Had he ever been something else?

He remembered living in a smaller, dream world, living half awake—

Spinningspinningspinning stop the earthturningturning stop.

Dead stop—millions hurled thousands of miles across the continent. Standing structures knocked flat, pressed down by a giant hand; the air seething with storm clouds and light. And the sun had received the shards . . .

He breathed in the burning solar gales.

The sun flickered—

—cut off for a second eons of solar streaming into the dark

abyss. In a moment the star would not be enough.

He drew himself into a concentrated mass, shaping himself into—

A leaping shout of energy and light, a huge spark jumping between the stars, leaving the sun to collapse into a dark, pitiable thing glowing on the edge of red and black. Dying.

Sirius.

Times was zero, though lesser vantages would have felt the time it had taken. He bathed in the star, his analogical consciousness assuming its form, assimilating its rhythms and profound structure of energy exchange; his accelerated intelligence reaching out to notice the material in orbit around the primary.

There was no one like him . . .

For a moment the ground was joined to the livid green sky by a two-pronged, misshapen finger of light. In the brief silence the sky became dark again and the moon cast its indifferent white light through a break in the clouds and was swiftly hidden by the woolly masses, the shoulders of protean night travelers moving toward dawn. The sun crouched below the world, held back by the storm. The rain started as a whisper and fell in a rush of crystalline droplets which still held the light of moon and stars in their structures. The thick, rich earth inhaled the flood and worms came to the surface and were washed pink.

The hammer blow struck stone, a god bringing chaos with his presence . . .

Sirius dimmed, waking him. The light flowing out faltered, leaving the ends to rush away like a tide going out hurriedly.

He reached out to Tau-Ceti *Oh God, release me, he prayed* leaving the burned out star. There he drew the binary companion into the main furnace *Make me small as I was before, give back all the lives,* feeding on the massed power. Briefly, the star flared, gobbling up its children *Let me die.*

I deny you! Whatever you are let me go. The center of stars, the galactic hearth drew him now. He went whispering between the stars, strong enough to feed on the tenuous gas and radiation between the suns, breathing the galaxy's atmosphere. He went like a beggar toward the locus of endless power, a beggar knocking over garbage cans, devouring the meager scraps and smallest sparks of life *They're all dying, the smallest ant, this lumbering beast had killed her and was pressing in from all sides, rushing into him with winds and currents and screams, outraged by his small remains, remaking the rest into itself. Anything, help me save me kill me . . . mother!*

Were there others? Or were they simply being silent, fearing the meeting that could only result in one new birth? He hurried, compressing the forces inside himself to crush all remains of the other time, reaching out to the brightest stars, a thousand beacons hanging in the abyss, and made them into himself *He was rushing upward through the floors of a huge iron building made of rusty girders, floors of rotting wood, trap doors open before his rush, dissolving . . .*

The pattern of himself grasped a hundred stars more in its net. His frontier flashed outward . . .

A lifeless body thrashing on the table . . .

His perimeter came to the edge of the galaxy and stopped—

The wheel of stars with its film of gas became his skin, and he filled it up.

The galaxy breathed. Its forces became his pulse.

He hurried, knowing that he was not everything.

A huge mass came down and crushed him forever.

And distant fears came close to him, tears moving slowly, leaving acid tracks in his cells as he blotted out his old self, forgetting . . .

He looked out into the dark—

—saw the small lights beyond—

—felt the cold which he could not pass across. He was forced to see in the old way, knowing things different from him, all around him.

He tried to expand at the sight of the infinite emptiness, tried to reach out to those faint brushes of light, almost disintegrated in the huge sigh of stars and gases and recovered, rested in a state of exaltation . . .

He began to throb. The island of stars began to pulse faster and faster, pushing against space. He pulled the two companion clouds into his center, flaring the globular clusters around the central vortex across the whole spectrum of light—

—Pulse.

The maelstrom of himself began to suck in dust and radiation into the center of the spiral and spew it out into his arms, spinning the starstorm faster, moving it in a new direction, streaming suns in its wake.

In a moment of eternity he was moving in a monstrous rush toward his new prey, and his light became a dark red . . .

A fist thrust into the sky, his grasping fingers broke through the cardboard—

—Into a bare room. With white walls and perfect corners,

THY BLOOD LIKE MILK

IAN WATSON

This tale is for the sun god, Tezcatlipoca, with my curses, and for you Marina—whom I never knew enough to love—with apologies and blessings, somewhat tardy . . .

Have you ever screamed at your nurse to go away—to leave you in peace—and hated her, as bitterly as you've ever hated anybody? And begged her, as you never begged anyone in your proud life before?

Ten of us lay in the ward in plastic webbing imprisoning us, yet only three of us really counted, Shanahan, Grocholski, and me, for we were the only presidents. Yet a big haul for them, indeed, three presidents! How cleverly the hospital distinguished between us and the ordinary runners: the extra dose of nerve sensitizer in the syringe, the absence of any opiates. We hung on the raw edge of pain, gritting our teeth as the taps were spun and at times—when our bloodstreams burned like second nervous systems on fire in our bodies, and it seemed we were being roasted on a gridiron, from our insides outwards—at such times we let go and screamed. Whereas when the runners were being drained they moaned but did not need to scream. Mixed in with their quarter-pint soup of drugs (anti-shock, anti-coagulant, vitamins, iron) they received the opiates that let them still catch the idea of pain, but be somewhat glassed off from it—while we three were locked up in bright tin boxes with the howl of a thumbnail on slate a thousand times amplified. The nerve sensitizer wasn't merely sadistic, but meant to aid the nurse monitoring the effects of the milking on our bodies; the opiates were supposed to block

off the worst of the sensations arising. I might say that according to the compensation laws we should have all had opiates. But that's how they ran a punishment ward. Idiot thinking. Shanahan, Grocholski, and I—we didn't hold each other's occasional screams and pleas against each other. The pain just happened to be unbearable. As simple as that. In the eyes of the runners our agony confirmed our presidencies. The Aztec priests tortured by the Spaniards before their congregations. So the Aztec priests screamed and begged, when their turn came? Their congregations still believed in them.

"You scum of the earth!" Marina hissed as she jabbed our tethered buttocks with that cruel syringe, an Ahab tormenting her own private whale over and over again. (But I did not know her, did not know *you* as Marina yet.) "Do you know what will happen to you today? We're going to take so much out of you and for so long that your brain will starve for oxygen, you'll be half way to an idiot, a drooling vegetable."

"You know that's illegal, you bitch," I snarled as you tickled my bare flesh with the syringe anticipatorily making my nerves try to crawl away.

"Anyone may make mistakes," her eyes gleamed.

Only a scare, a put-on. Panic. She wouldn't dare.

"You must be a pretty girl under that mask. Why do you hate us so bitter?"

"Why give you the satisfaction of knowing?"

"You gave me the satisfaction of knowing just then—there's something to know."

And the syringe hit my flesh hard, at that, and dug in.

The hot acid gruel washed into me. My veins now lava-flows cursed with a consciousness of their own heat and motion. The exquisite agony of being emptied out. The pain of my tortured body racing to make more and more blood as the metabolic drugs goaded it on.

And under and around this pain, the fear that as life-blood flowed out through the taps, my brain was starving and impoverished, on the brink of becoming the brain of an animal, a toad, a stone—

"Bitch!" I screamed.

Out through one set of pipes flowed my rich blood, in through another the miserable substitute fluid that my body raced to build upon. And Marina (whom I did not know as Marina yet) danced the empty syringe before my eyes, to conduct the music of my torment—keeping an eye on the dials and gauges but pretending not to. Why did she hate us so bitter?

Well, I hated her just as bitter! Why ask why. I knew it when I rode for the sun, I might end up here if they found one single excuse to lay their hands on me.

Then the pain got too bad to think about anything else.

No windows in the ward. What was there to look out on? We were outside any Fuller dome, in this hospital. The pollution crawling up and down the sides of the building, dark grey to pitch black. A general turbidity over the land: over the great plains where the braves of another age and world hunted buffalo; on the treeless hills, where it had long since snuffed out the pines; pressing soft on the Great Dead Lakes, and, further out, pressing soft on the dark cesspool of the North Atlantic. Pressing upon the superhighways where mostly automatic traffic crawled and where we had hunted in our packs for that rare bird of paradise, that dark orchid, the patch of clear sun—the “sunspot” that blooms mysteriously amid the murk, shafts of gold piercing a funnel of light down to earth whereby the clear sky could be briefly glimpsed and worshipped. Were not the deaths we caused on the highways only petty sacrifices to ensure the coming of the sun?

And the murk lay thickly on this hospital, Superhighway 31 Crash Hospital, Prison Wing, in whose ward we swooned in pain as we gave up our lifeblood to recompense the beneficiaries of this murk, authors of the forever eclipse of the sun. . . .

When did I set out upon the sun trail? When did I drive down my own superhighway of the spirit, choosing my own side of the split world, the zone of blood and the sun? Oh these years of hunting for the sun—down ten times a thousand miles of gloomy darkness, oily globules crawling on our windshields, eyes glazed by the green gleaming radar screens of our sun buggies as we swung them, steering blind, through the rivers of automated slave cars, slave trucks riding their guide lines! Brains blazing with the data stream from Meteorology Central—the temperature gradients, the shifting chemistry of the pollutants, the swirling shapes of air turbidity, the cat’s cradle of contrails spied upon by the satellite stations high above! (Have you seen a picture of the Earth from satellite? The masked globe, in its gossamer spidery web of contrails, a mud of many shades of brown ochre grey stirred slowly, punctured in several magic shifting locations by the white walls of sunspots drilling

their way to the barren ground or the dead seas or the great photophobic anaerobic algae beds (where, perversely, the light kills them) or the dots of Fuller domes where the wasp world lives out its memories of middle class existence.) Grabbing the data with our minds to make a gestalt of it that will lead us to the sun! These years of hunting for the sun—and finding it! Being first to reach those clear fresh zones of radiance, where the flash harvests green and bronzes the earth, and tiny flowers rage and seed and die within the span of thirty minutes. Being the only men to see it. To know that nature was still fleetingly alive, in an accelerated abbreviated panic form, still mistress of a panic beauty. These years of discovering the sun and duelling for it on the highways, and ever in the back of our minds somewhere awareness of the Compensation Laws—the blood-debt to be settled.

“Hey,” called Shanahan, as Marina came to him next in line with the syringe primed and loaded, a little bit of machismo on his part. “Why not come for a ride in my sun buggy after I get out of here? I’ll drive you into the deep dark countryside and we won’t hunt for no sunspots either. What we’ve got to do, we can do in the dark! Hey—but come to think of it—why not just come on a sun hunt with me? Put a blush of real genuine sunburn on those delicate white limbs of yours. Or could it be that you’re just a wasp that buzzes about a sundome for her holidays, and never flies out?”

“Yes I’m a wasp, this is my sting.”

And she stung Shanahan’s quivering buttocks with the syringe, putting an abrupt end to his taunts. He hung in the white plastic webbing, twitching with pain, fat fly in a spider’s web that he couldn’t break out of. Marina spun the taps, spiderlike sucked him dry, until he howled.

Till he screamed like ice, like thumbnails on slate.

And Marina—with what grim delight you watched him writhing.

With as much magic and mysticism in the hunt for the sun as there was meteorology, remember how we met together to plot strategies, when our own sun club—Smoking Mirror—first coalesced (later to be known as Considine’s Commandos)? And the Indian runner, Marti, who said that his great great granddaddy had been an Indian magician, who stayed with Smoking

Mirror till one black afternoon he pushed his buggy too fast, too wildly for a mere machine, down a highway crowded with slave traffic, perceptions throbbing with input, idea associations swarming, sense of time and space distraught—for he'd taken a peyotl pill to commune with his magical ancestry. Marti who knew all the sun myths of all the Indians, South and North, of the Americas. Marti who said the name we should call ourselves by—Smoking Mirror—alias of the savage wealthy treacherous Aztec sun god, Tezcatlipoca. Marti who wore the obsidian knife round his neck on a leather thong. The same knife (stolen from a museum case) that the Aztec priests used to tear out the palpitating hearts of the prisoners sacrificed to Tezcatlipoca.

When we reached his smashed buggy and went out to it in our oxygen masks (we had a few minutes before the patrols arrived from the nearest emergency point, with their Compensation Laws to enforce on us, for the flanks of the highway were strewn with the wreckage of the slave cars Marti had collided with) we found the obsidian knife had turned, by a freak, as Marti struck the steering wheel, and driven itself into his chest.

I pulled it out and hung it in my buggy and never washed the blood off the blade. We met the sun that day, the next day, and for three days after—blazing sunspots drilling their way through the smog as we charted our crazy sad angry course of mourning and celebration of Marti's spirit, across the continent, till even Meteorology Central sat up and took notice of the wild unstatistical improbability of our successes (a first sighting of a sunspot is a kind of scalp, see? a new brave's feather in our headdress) and the sun hordes came tracking us from all over the land to batten on us, converging, duelling, crashing towards us, driving our luck away—Tezcatlipoca would only reveal himself to us, to praise Marti who had named us in his honour.

Only after that when Marti had become history (though the dark-stained knife still hung in my buggy) the new name Considine's Commandos became known, and we settled down to a long period of reasonable successes, but never so successful as that one wild week after Marti died, sacrificed to the sun.

We duelled on the highways with the other clubs, skittering through the slave convoys where the wasps sat back in waspish disbelief with their windows blanked, lapping up video reruns and playing Scrabble, hearing occasionally the scream of tyres from the impossible Outside, brief nightmare intrusion on their

security, banshees, werewolves, spooks haunting the wide open Darks between the Fuller domes.

One club that even called themselves the Banshees we tangled with on the southern highways, knowing them only by their radar blips, sneers and taunts over the radio, till one day—or night, where's the difference?—we all of us happened into the same bar at the same time, and I was carrying Marti's obsidian knife, beneath my shirt, or I would never have walked out of that bar to drive again. This time Marti had saved me, but the knife had other enemy blood on it now; and Marti's spirit seemed to disappear. At the cost of losing us the sun, he saved me. For weeks we hunted. For months. And nothing. We got to loathe the midnight roundup of the sunspot sightings from Met Central. Things were beginning to fall apart. Would have done, maybe, if we hadn't been cracked wide open, by the day that brought the Compensation Laws down on all our heads.

"You know what I'd do to that bitch if we were out of these plastic cocoons," Grocholski growled. "That bitch" was around the corner preparing our meals. "I'd rip off her sweet white mask and sweet white uniform, hook her up to this marvel of medical science and drain her whole damn bloodstream while I raped her as cool and clinical as you like, and put no liquid back in her but my seed—what's one fluid ounce to eight pints of the red stuff?—and I'd leave her hanging here in the web for her friends to find like veal in a slaughterhouse."

Vicious sentiments, Grocholski. But Grocholski had performed just as nasty as that—as cool and clinical, I had heard, though I hadn't met the man before the hospital threw us together here in the ward. He had pulled a girl's teeth out with pliers, one by one, for trying to walk out on him . . .

Vicious enough to bring Marina out, so genuinely distraught that she ripped off her white gauze mask and let us take a look at her full face for the first time—beautiful, I thought, amazed, though I hardly dared let myself admit it—not Barbi-dolly or Bambi-cute, but strong with a warp somewhere in it, maybe in the twist of the lips, that gave her the stamp of authenticity—being unlike the million other stereotypes from the same mould. And her green eyes blazed, till they boiled with tears that evaporated almost as she shed them, so hotly angry was she.

"I don't believe in any heaven. For you vicious beasts killed my man. My heaven was here on Earth! But now I believe in hell. And I know how to make a hell for you. Nobody will get

any opiates from now on. Nobody. Thanks to your politeness."

"Hey," protested a runner from his white webbing. "You don't have the right to deprive us—that's illegal!"

"Isn't your people's philosophy outside the Law?"

I tried to tell her then, because suddenly I wanted her to know.

"We do have a code to follow, the same as you—it's a different code, is all . . ."

You didn't hear me, Marina, or you didn't seem to. For Shanahan was shouting:

"They always used the Indian women as torturers! The girls made the best!"

So he'd noticed, too, how high your cheek bones were, though masked and hidden partly by your rounded cheeks, the skin not pulled so tight—sealskin over a canoe frame—the way it had been with some Indian girls I'd known, riding for the sun with us, recognizing—and that was what I wanted you to understand, Marina—how we were the new buffalo hunters of the darkness, the new braves and warriors of the polluted darkened highways.

Then things got noisy in the ward. The act of freeing your mouth from the mask's embrace had freed all of our mouths too—but not so much for taunts and obscenities, for a while, till it turned ugly again, but for pointed remarks directed at a real and sexy—if hostile—woman.

With the mask off you became more real, and though we still hated you, we couldn't dismiss you as a perfect plastic wasp girl anymore. At least I couldn't. You'd graduated to the status of an enemy.

Marina stared round the ward hotly, at the devils hanging in hell in their plastic wrappings, waiting helplessly to repay their debts to society—and made no move to put her mask back on.

She even answered a question.

"Why do I do this? I volunteered. It's not a popular job, dealing with your people. I volunteered, so I could hurt some of you the way that I've been hurt."

"How have you been hurt, Princess?" yawned Grocholski.

"Didn't you hear her saying we'd killed her man, Gr'olski?"

You gazed at me bitterly, yet in your unmasked gaze was a kind of salutation.

"How did it happen?"

"How do you think you kill good men? You ran him down in the dark, deliberately, while he was tending at an accident."

"Did you see it yourself?"

"Wasps can't see to fly in the dark," jeered Grocholski, carrying machismo further into the zone of his own personal viciousness.

"That's how I know," Marina told me icily, ignoring Grocholski who was thrashing about in his web simulating laughter. "Talk like that. Attitudes like that. Oh, he could see you coming on the radar screen before he stepped out of the ambulance. He could see. But he stayed out on the road to rescue a woman caught in a burning car. He was still foaming it down when you ran him over. You dragged him half a mile. They wouldn't let me see him, he was so smashed."

"Wouldn't *let* you see him?" Grocholski caught out of what she said—but he didn't press the point.

And I wanted her to know—to really understand, inside herself—what we people had, when we weren't being vicious beasts—how we were the real authentic people of our times, facing up to the dirt and dark outside instead of hiding in Fuller domes, hunting down the last glimpses of the natural world—the sun, the sky! How we were the last braves, the last hunters—how could I get that through to the Indian in you smothered in the plastic waspish flesh?

"The ambulance man saw it all on radar—how you changed course at the last moment, to hit him, out there on the road."

"Ambulance man probably hated us anyway—tell any sort of lie."

"Do you," in that frozen voice that I yearned to melt, "deny you run men down just for kicks?"

"You're not so kind yourself, are you? Why not ask yourself deep down what you're doing here torturing us—whether you aren't enjoying it? Revenge? A long revenge, hey! Something you're specializing in?" (Dared I say it yet—and expect you to accept at least a little bit of it—if not immediately, then later maybe when you were alone, lying awake in bed and worried because something had gone astray in your scheme of things?) "You're interested in us beasts. You took this job to be near us. Like a zoo visitor watches the tigers. Smell our musk, our fear, our reality."

Marina's hand cracked across my face, so hard my whole body rocked in its white cocoon.

I swallowed the taste of blood in my mouth and stared hard at her, whispered:

"True, it's true, think about it."

A look of horror came into her eyes, as she quickly pulled the gauze mask over nose and mouth again.

I suppose the Compensation Laws worked our way too. How else could it be, in a split society?

They bought our tacit support for the maintenance of "civilised" life—the deceits that otherwise we'd have done our best to explode, us sunclubbers, saboteurs, ghettopeople, all of us outlaws (whom it's plain ridiculous to call outlaw when full fifty per cent of the people live outside of wasp society). And the wasp world could only blast us out of existence by turning its own massive nuclear artillery upon itself—so, in return for the relative security of its slave superhighways, our own relative freedom to roam them. If the wasp world put too many feet wrong, explosives would go off in its highway tunnels, gatherings of the tribes pull down a Fuller dome, a satellite shuttle plane blasting off be met by a home-made missile with a home-made warhead on it. And if we put too many feet wrong (taking wasp lives with our sun buggies was one way) and if they caught us, there would be a blood debt to pay, hooked up to their milking machines, where we were not supposed to be hurt *too* much, or die, or get brain damage, but just *repay, repay* society. For they need red blood like vampires need it.

So I began working on your mind, Marina.

As for the others, well, Grocholski's thoughts were of tearing his enemies' teeth out with pincers, he knew nothing about minds. A king—but a stupid king, like many kings who must have triumphed over the stupidity of their subjects by a greater and crueller stupidity.

Shanahan was a subtler sort of president, had some idea what we stood for, could put it some way into words. Yet he couldn't see his way clear, as I could, into this woman's soul with all its possibilities.

And you worked on my body, Marina.

Neglected your promised cruelties to the others. Still treated Shanahan and Grocholski like dirt, but carelessly, indifferently, reserving your finest moments for me.

And I tried to grit my teeth through the pain and not scream out meaningless noises or empty curses, but always something that would drill the hole deeper and deeper into you—as the

sun drills through the smog—till the protective layers were undercut and the egg of myself could be laid in your heart.

"Milkmaid with buckets of blood in your yoke, why not believe me?" I winced, as Marina thrust the gruel of drugs into the tender parts of my body. "We're hunting for something real in a dirty world—the dirt you wasps have spread around, till there's such a pile you have to hide yourselves away from it."

She drained the blood from me till I fainted, green eyes boring into me, doting on my pain . . .

The Myth of the Five Suns—how brightly Marti told it one day after a long fruitless race for the sun that took us near five hundred miles across the plains, till we pulled in tired and restless at a service area run by ghettopeople with their hair like headdresses, like black coronas around eclipsed suns.

"Five worlds there were," said Marti, the pupils of his eyes dilated to black marbles, his tight brown skin over small sharp bones like a rabbit sucked dry by ants, wizened by the desert sunshine that he had smarted under in his dreams. "In the First World men swam about like fishes under a Sun of Jewels. This world perished in a flamestorm brought about by the rising of the second sun, the Sun of Fire. The fishes changed into chickens and dogs that raced about in the great heat, unwilling to pause for their feet were burning. But this Sun of Fire died down in turn, gave way to the Sun of Darkness, whose people fed on pitch and resin. They in their turn were swallowed up by an earthquake and a Sun of Wind arose. The few survivors of the Sun of Darkness became airy dancing monkeys that lived on fruit. But the fifth sun was the Sun of Light—the one the ancient Mexicans knew. Which sun are we under now, can you riddle me that?"

"Sun of Darkness," answered one of the ghettopeople. "Here's your pitch and resin to eat." Dumping our plates of hamburgers, which may have been made from oil sludge or algae—so perhaps he was right in a way.

Then Snowflake—of the snub nose and blond pigtailed, with her worry beads of rock-hard dried chestnuts on a silver chain—who was riding with Marco in his buggy—wanted to tell a story herself, and Marti let her go ahead while we were consuming the burgers.

"There was this waspman, see, whose slave car broke down on the highway miles from town, and quite by chance in the

midst of a sunspot. He'd lost all sense of time on the journey, watching video, so when the car stopped he thought he'd reached his destination—especially when he opened the car door and saw the sun shining and a blue sky overhead, like at home in the Fuller dome. He got out of the car, too busy with his briefcase to notice that under that sun and that blue sky the land stretched out black and devastated, a couple inches deep in sludge. An area where some light-hating plants had taken over, see, which had the trick of dissolving if the sun came out . . .”

“What?” cried Marco, indignant.

“Shut up, this is a story! At that moment the power came on in his car again and away it whisked leaving him standing there in the road. Other cars zipped by on either side. He waved his arms at them and held his briefcase up but all the passengers were watching video and had their windows opaqued. He got scared and leapt off the road into the sludge. However the sunspot was coming to a close now. The blue sky misted over and soon he was all alone in the darkness with cars zipping by on one side and a hand clutching down his throat for his lungs as the pollution flowed back, his eyes watering onion tears. And in the darkness, doubly blinded by tears, he wandered further and further away from the road into the sludge. Even the noise of the cars seemed to be coming four ways at once to him. But now it was dark again the sludge was coming together, shaping itself into fungi two feet high, and amoeba things as big as his foot, and wet mucous tendrils like snots ten feet long that coiled and writhed about . . . and all kinds of nameless nightmares were there in the darkness squelching and slobbering about him . . . So he went mad, I guess. Or maybe he was mad to start with.”

A few runners, a few of the ghettopeople applauded, but Marco looked disgusted at her butting in—though our mouths had been full while she was doing the talking—and Marti expressed his annoyance at what he thought of as her sloppy nursery horror-comic world, preferring his horror neat like raw spirit, and religious and classical—and as we drank off our tart metallic beer (solution of iron filings) to wash the burgers down, he dwelt on the how and the when of the Aztec sacrifices to the sun.

“Oh handsome was the prisoner they taught to play the flute and smoke in a neat and elegant fashion and sing like Caruso. After a year of smoking and singing and playing the flute, four virgins were given to him to make love to. Ten days

after that they took him out onto the last terrace of the temple. They opened his chest with one single slash of a knife. This knife." (He whirled the obsidian blade on the thong from around his neck, where he'd hung it when he left the buggy, flashed it at us.) "Unzipped him, tore out his heart!"

How strange, and remarkable, that the heartblood of the Aztecs' prisoner flowing for the sun should become our own heartblood pumped into storage bottles and refrigerated with glycerol at this hospital! A sacrifice of ice against a sacrifice of fire—both harshly painful—the one lasting as long as an iceberg melting, the other over and done with in a flash of time!

Waking up weak-headed but set in my purpose, growing sharper with each hour, I shouted for you to come to my web-side, as Shanahan and Grocholski stared at me bemused and grumbled to one another about this perversion of machismo.

"Nurse!"

And you drifted to my side, green eyes agleam, hate crystals in your Indian skull.

"What is it, Considine?"

"Mightn't you hurt me a bit more if I knew you were a person with a name? A nameless torturer never had much fun. Wouldn't you love to be begged for mercy by name—the way *he* called you by name, with emotion—the emotions of fear and anguish, if not of love? The victim begs to know his tormentor's name."

"So you're a victim are you?"

"We're all the victims of this dirty world."

"No, you're not victims, not you people. You're here to pay because you made victims of other people. So that the lives of your future victims may be saved, by your own life-blood."

Almost as an afterthought, you added softly:

"My name's Marina, Considine."

"Ah."

Then I could let my forced attention unfocus and disperse into the foggy wool of fading pain . . .

And when she came again to plunge the bitter drugs into my body and spin the taps that recommenced the sacrifice of blood, she murmured, eyes agleam with the taunting of me:

"Your blood has saved two lives already, Considine—that must please you."

"Marina," I hissed before she had a chance to stick the syringe in me, "Marina, it's only a role in *our* game that you're playing, don't you realize? In our Sunhunters' game! For sure it's our game, *ours*, not *yours*!"

She held the syringe back, letting me see the cruel needle.

"You know the name of the game, Marina? No, of course you don't, in your white sterile uniform and your plastic waspish life, how could you ever know? But if you've really got Indian blood in your veins, that might help you understand . . ."

"What's there to understand, Considine? I see nothing to understand except you're scared of a little pain."

"Not scared," I lied. "The pain, the savagery—has to be. You have to hurt me, it's your destiny. Day by day you sacrifice me to the sun, my priestess!"

While she still hung back from me, listening in spite of herself, I told her something of Tezcatlipoca—of the giant in an ashen veil carrying his head in his hand, of the pouncing jaguar, of the dreadful shadow, of the bear with brilliant eyes. Of how he brought riches and death. Of the blood sacrifices on the last terrace of the temple. I told how Marti's knife had turned against his own bosom and how the sun had greeted us in splendour every day for a week thereafter. She went on listening, puzzled and angry, till the anger overcame the puzzlement in her, and she thrust the syringe home . . .

But of Tezcatlipoca the trickster I hadn't told her—nor of his deadly practical jokes.

How he arrived at a festival and sang a song (the song the prisoners were taught to sing) so entrancing that all the villagers followed him out of town, where he lured them onto a flimsy bridge, which collapsed, tossing hundreds of them down into the rocky gorge. How he walked into a village with a magic puppet dancing in his hand (the dance the prisoners were taught to dance) that lured the villagers closer and closer in their dumb amazement, till scores of them suffocated in the crush. How he pretended to be sorry, told the angry survivors that he couldn't guarantee his conduct, that they had better stone him to death to prevent more innocent victims succumbing to his tricks. And stone him to death they did. But his body stank so vilely, that many more people sickened and died before they could dispose of it.

As I lay there wracked with pain, these stories spun through my head in vivid bloodstained pictures, and my mind sang the song that led the sun's victims onto the bridge, and my body danced the twitching dance that suffocated the survivors, and

my sweat glands and my excrement stank them to death.

How would I, Considine, sun's Messenger, lead and dance and stink Marina out of this bright-lit ward, into the darkness that was my home?

When a doctor made his rounds of the blood dairy, he remarked how roughly I was being treated.

"Don't kill the goose that lays the golden egg!" he twinkled, to Marina. No doubt nurses had broken down on this hateful job before.

I smiled at her when he said that, for after a time assuredly the victim and the torturer become accomplices, and when that happens their roles are fast becoming interchangeable. I grinned the death-grin of Tezcatlipoca as he lay dead in the village and stank the villagers into vulture fodder for a joke . . .

So the Doctor thought she might try to assassinate me, snuff me out! Surely the least likely outcome of our duel, by now.

The sacrifice was always preceded by a period of great sensual *indulgence*—a recompense for the pain to be suffered. Yet this victim here, myself, was tied down, bound in white plastic thongs, while his tormentor hung over him day by day replaying a feeble mimic spearthrust into his body, spilling his blood but replacing it again. Day by day it hurt rackingly, yet death never came. What could come? Only freedom—reversal of the sacrifice—overwhelming pleasure—triumph—and the sun! My pain-wracked grin glowed confident, drove wild anguished discords through Marina's heart.

"Be careful, Nurse—this one's metabolic rate is far too high. He's burning himself up."

"Yes, yes," murmured Marina, distractedly, fleeing from me across the dark plateaux of her heart . . .

And, when more days had passed and I felt invincible in my agony, I commanded:

"Come to me, Marina."

Does the male spider command the female spider to come to him with her ruthless jaws? Does the male mantis command the female mantis who will wrench his head off with her saw-blade elbows?

"Marina."

She came to my side, under the bemused gaze of Shanahan and Grocholski, who had given up trying to understand, and, unblessed by the presence of Tezcatlipoca in their skulls, were glad enough to lie back in their plastic webs relaxing from

those first few days of machismo, happy enough that the heat was off them. They kept quiet and watched me wonderingly as I suffered and commanded,

"Marina."

"Yes, Considine?"

"The time's approaching, Marina."

"Time, Considine?"

"There has to be a climax. What climax can there be? Think!"

"I . . ."

"I'll make it easier for you. You can't drain me dry. Can't . . . terminate me. What satisfaction would there be in that? Who would you turn to then? To Shanahan? Grocholski? Look at them. Lying like slugs in their beds—great torpid bullies. What satisfaction would there be? Sure, Grocholski is a bastard, he'd pull your teeth out one by one with a pair of pliers. But has he any . . . spirit? Has the sun god whispered in his ear?"

Marina turned, watching the two presidents lolling in their white webs, shook her head—as though she understood the question.

Turning, she whispered:

"What climax, Considine?"

"I'll tell you tomorrow Marina—unless you can tell me before then. Sleep on it Marina, sleep on it . . ."

She came to me in the night like a sleepwalker—Lady with a Pencil Torch, whose beam she played over the webbing till she located the release tag, and there she rested her hand but didn't pull it yet-a-while.

As she knelt there bereft of her mask, her face level with mine, I gazed at her, not as avenging fury and priestess, but briefly as another human being passing in the dark. She knelt poised at the mid-point of a transformation in her role, for a brief time quietly happy in the lightening of the burden, the falling away of the robe of one office before the assumption of the next.

This pause must have lasted you an eternity, Marina.

I watched the long high planes of your cheeks in the backwash of light off the plastic webbing, the hilltops of your cheekbones, sharper now in the contrast of dark and bright—and your eyes dark pools beyond the cheekbones, in shadow—and kept my peace.

Tezcatlipoca took the form of an ashen-veiled giant carrying his head in his hand and searched for a sunspot where he could be himself, the sun. The sight of him in the dark made nervous people fall dead with fear, the way the wasps in their slave cars shivered at our banshee wail as we passed them by on the highways, invisible, vindictive, reckless. Yet one brave man seized hold of the giant and held on to him—bound him in white plastic webbing, in spite of his screams and curses. Held him hour after hour till near morning when it was time for the sun to rise. Then the ashen giant began promising the brave man wealth and even omnipotence to let him go. At the promise of omnipotence the brave man agreed and tore out the giant's heart as a pledge before he let him go. Wrapping the heart up in his handkerchief, took it home with him. When he opened it up to look at the heart, however, there was nothing but ashes in it. For the sun had already risen, and in his new omnipotence broke his promise and burned his pledge.

Take heed, Marina, hand on the release tag—take heed of the sun when he is free. You hold my heart now in your handkerchief, blood drips into your bottles through the mesh, safely. The heart is not yet ashes,

Her hand touching the webbing, her Indian face divided by a watershed of light . . . at this brief pause in time could I have afforded a little pity, a little affection . . . ?

"Is it time . . . ?"

She whispered into the darkness from which the sun must rise—for the sun is time itself (or so I thought then) so far as our twenty-four hour clocks knew, so far as the circadian rhythms of our bodies are aware.

What else is time, but the sun in the sky? But this is the Age Without Time—for the travellers over the blackened prairies, for the wasp refugees in the Fuller domes!

At the end of every fifty-two years, the fires were all quenched throughout Mexico, and a fresh fire kindled on a living prisoner's chest—to keep time on the move. What fire shall be kindled in whose chest, to bring Time back into the world today?

"Yes, it's time to kindle the sun."

Marina's breast rose and fell convulsively as she pulled the tag.

Plastic thongs slid off my limbs in four directions at once like frightened snakes and I slipped to the floor, free of the pain

hammock, knocking aside the sanitary facilities which she'd forgotten to remove, with a noisy clatter that alerted Shanan. He craned his head against the tension of the web, as I sat massaging life into my limbs.

"Considine," he called softly. A worried Marina flashed the pencil of light across his face, and he blinked blindly at us.

"Considine, get me out of here—please!"

"Put him back to sleep, Marina." (Quietly.) "It's not his time for release—Tezcatlipoca isn't with him." My feet prickling intolerably with thawing-out frostbite.

She crept towards Shanan, dazzling him with her pencil of light; injected him with something, while he imagined his web was being undone. By the time my legs were fit to stand on, he was calm again.

She gripped my arm to steady me, helped me dress.

"Your car's in the ambulance sheds."

"Buggy," said I angrily. "Sun buggy."

"There's so much I have to learn."

"There isn't much," I assured her—and this, alas, was honest—as we slipped out of the ward toward the darkness of freedom.

"What is the sun really like?"

"A ball of incandescent gas..."

Of course Marina hadn't seen the sun. Except as a baby, long time ago, forgotten, maybe. Models of the sun were all. Hot yellow lamps hanging from the eggshells of the Fuller domes, switched on in the morning, switched off again at night. If a sunspot had ever bathed the hospital, she wouldn't have seen it through the solid walls.

As we crept into the ambulance sheds, she began to cough, grating explosive little coughs that she did her best to stifle with her hand.

A dull orange glow from standby lighting pervaded the gloom of the sheds, where half a dozen of the great sleek snub-nosed ambulances were parked and a number of impounded buggies—beyond, light spilling from a window in the crew room door and the sound of muffled voices.

We climbed into my buggy—the key was in the lock—and I ran my hands gently over the controls, reuniting myself with them.

Tezcatlipoca's jaguar stenciled on my seat radiated confidence strength suppleness and savagery through my body . . .

Marina sat limply in the passenger seat looking around my world, stifling her cough—but the air was cleaner in my buggy, would get even cleaner once we were on the move.

“Who opens the doors?”

“We have to wait for an ambulance to leave, then chase it out. How soon till we see the sun, Considine?”

“Sooner than you think.”

“How do you *know*?”

“What is the sun, Marina? A blazing yellow ball of gas radiating timelessly and forever at six thousand degrees Centigrade, too bright to look upon. A bear with bells on his ankles, striped face, blazing eyes. A magician with a puppet dancing in his hand. A smoking mirror. A giant in an ashen veil with his head in his hand. A G-type star out on the edge of the galaxy around which planets and other debris revolve. Your choice.”

“I’ve seen movies of the sun—maybe it’s no big thing after all.”

“Oh it’s big, Marina—it’s the climax.”

Then a siren went off in the shed, shockingly loud, and the lights came up full.

The ambulance crew spilled from their room, zipping their gear and fixing their masks as they ran. They took an ambulance two along the line from us.

Its monobeam flared out ahead, splashing a hole bright as the sun’s disc on the door. Its turbines roared.

And the door flowed smoothly, swiftly, up into the roof.

As I started the buggy’s engine a look of fear and terrible understanding came over Marina’s face—sleepwalker waking on the high cliff edge. She tore at the door handle. But naturally it was locked and she couldn’t tell where to unlock it.

“Marina!” Using the voice that cuts through flesh to the bone. “Quit it!” A voice I’d never used to beg or plead with in the hospital. Authority voice of the Sun Priest. Obsidian voice. Voice that cuts flesh. Black, volcanic, harsh.

Her hand fell back upon the seat.

The ambulance, blinding the smog with its monobeam, sped through the doors—and us after it, before the doors dropped again.

Great Tezcatlipoca, Who Bringeth Wealth and War, Sunshine and Death, Sterility and Harvest! For Whom Blood Floweth Like Milk, That Milk May Flow!

The smog so thick outside. Even the great eye of the ambulance saw little. Undoubtedly they were relying on radar already, as I was—and wondering, doubtless, what the tiny blip behind their great blip represented, Remora riding on a shark . . . I dropped back, not to worry them.

When we got to the highway entry point, I took the other direction.

Whichever way I took, I knew it led to the sun.

Two hours down the highway, Marina sleeping on my shoulder, bored with the monotonous environment of the sun buggy (green radar no substitute for video), radio crackling out data from Met Central revealing total disarray among the air currents, turbid gas blowing everywhichways, absurd peaks and dips in the nitrogen oxides, crazy chemical transformations—a scene in disarray awaiting my touch, and what I brought it was the body of Marina, magnet to the iron filings of the everywhichways polluted sky.

Two hours down the highway, piloting with ever-greater certainty, careless of pursuit, I picked the radiophone up, tuned to the Sun Club waveband . . .

Nearby, voices of some charioteers of the sun.

"Considine calling you. Considine's Commandos. Smokey Mirror Sun Club. I'm heading straight for the sun. Anyone caring to join me is welcome. Vector in on my call sign . . ."

My voice woke Marina up, to the babble of voices answering over the radiophone.

"Considine?"

"How did you get out?"

"How do you *know*? Man?"

Who had ever dared call a hunt into being among sunrunners other than his own? How great the risk he ran, of shame, revenge, contempt!

How did I know, indeed!

"Where are we?" yawned Marina. "What's going on?"

"We're hunting for the sun—I've cried fox and I'm calling the hounds in."

"Whose voices are those?"

"It hasn't been done before, what I'm doing. Those voices—the cry of the hounds."

"Considine, I'm hungry. Is there anything to eat in the car?"

"Hush—I've told you, *buggy* is the name. No eating now—it's time to fast. This is a religious moment."

A louder challenging voice that I recognized broke in on the waveband. The Magnificent Amberson's.

"Considine? This is Amberson. Congratulations on your break-out—how did you do it?"

"Thanks, Amberson. I got a nurse to spring me."

"A nurse?"

"She's with me now—she's part of it."

"Hope you know what you're doing, Considine. You really meaning to call a general hunt?"

"A gathering of the tribes. That's it, Amberson."

"Sure your head isn't screwed up by loss of blood? The weather data is chaos. Sure you haven't bought your way out of there by offering something in return—say, a gathering of the tribes in a certain location?"

"Screw you, Amberson—I'll settle with you for that slander after I've greeted the sun. Sun hounds, you coming chasing me?"

And a rabble of voices, from far and near, jammed the waveband.

Marina clutched my arm.

"It frightens me, Considine—who are they all? Where do they come from?"

"Some of the other half of the people in this land, Marina—just some of the other half of the people. The ones who stayed outside in the dark. The ones that weren't wasps. The Indians your ancestors would have understood. Spirit voices they are—gods of the land."

"Indians my ancestors?"

"Yes."

Green blips swam by me on the radar screen—slave cars that I sped by effortlessly. I paid no heed to the weather data. My gestalt, my mind-doll, was fully formed. Its embodiment hunched by me in the passenger seat, the curves and planes of Marina's body were the fronts and isobars and isohets of the surrounding dirt-darkened land. A message, she had been placed in the hospital for me to find, with pain the trigger to waken me to her meaning. So many forms a true message can take—a circle of giant stones of the megalith builders, a bunch of knotted strings of different lengths and colours (the *quipu* archives of the Incas)—a human body if need be. If the human body becomes a world unto the lover or the torturer, may not the world itself with its dales and hillocks, its caves and coverts and cliffs, be a body? Marina, my chart, on whom I read my destination!

"Now you must take your clothes off, Marina, for you'll soon be bathing in the sun—we'll soon be lovers."

"My clothes?"

"Do so."

I used the Voice of the Sun, the Voice from the Sky. And dazed she began to fumble at her nurse's uniform.

Her nudity clarified my mind—I knew exactly where to turn off now, on to which decrepit smaller road.

"Sun hounds!" I sang. "Don't miss the turning."

Goosebumps marched across Marina's flesh and her nipples stood out in the mental cold of her life's climax—the dawning awareness that she had been inserted into life long ago and grown into precisely this, and this, shape, as hidden marker for the greatest future sunspot, burning spot of all burning spots that might start the clouds of darkness rolling back across the land at last, burning away the poisoned blackened soup from the Earth's bowl in a flame-oven of renewal.

"Sun hounds!" I sang. "The Sun of Darkness is about to set. The Sun of Fire comes next in turn. The men of this creation are to be destroyed by a rain of fire, changed into hopping chickens and dogs."

"Are you mad, Considine?" came Amberson's voice, nearer now. "Look, I'm sorry I said what I did. I apologize. But, man—are you mad!"

Now that I'd turned off to the east I was driving slower, yet the buggy rocked and jolted over the broken-backed minor road, tossing us about like fish in a scaling drum.

"It bruises me!" cried Marina, shipwrecked, clinging to her seat.

Your white nudity, Marina—and the Earth's dark nudity to be explored, revealed!

"I give you the sun, you hounds and runners and presidents of this land!" I hurled the words into the babbling radiophone. And even Met Central was starting to show excitement, for they were listening too, and beginning to feed out data rapidly that vectored in on me and my position.

As I stared through the windshield, the greyness ahead slowly lightened to a misty white that spiralled higher and higher into the upper air. We could see fifty yards, a hundred yards ahead. A great light bubble was forming in the dark. In wonder and gratitude, I slackened speed.

We stopped.

"Thank God for that," muttered Marina.

"Considine here, you sun hounds—you'd better come up

fast, for I'm in the light-bubble now, it's rising, spiralling above, five minutes off the sun at most I'd say. It's *big*, this one."

"Is that the truth, Considine?" Amberson demanded.

"The truth? Who's nearest?" I called to the sun runners in general. And looked around. My buggy stood on a smashed stretch of road bandaging the blackened ground, at the base of a great funnel of strengthening light . . .

"Maybe I am." (Very loud, and breathlessly—as though running ahead of his buggy to catch me up.) "Harry Zammitt of Helios Hunters. I'm . . . coming into the fringes of it now. I see your buggy, Considine. The white whirlpool. Up and up! It's all true. Considine—I don't know how to say it. What you've done. Busting out, hunting down the sun in a matter of hours!"

As that first buggy bumped into the intensifying bubble of light, I piloted my own machine off the road onto the black ground.

We sat, watching the first rays of the sun burn through in golden shafts as the last mist melted.

And suddenly the day was on fire around us.

I squinted up through dark glasses and my windshield at a sun that seemed greater and brighter, a different colour even, from any I'd seen before, steely whiter—as if there was less separating me from the sun, that day.

"Out," I ordered Marina, leaning over her bare legs to flip the door-lock open.

She stepped out obediently into the sunshine, while I gathered the obsidian knife up by the thong from under my seat, dropped it in my pocket.

"But it hurts," she cried in surprise—the hopping chicken with burnt feet, exactly! "It's too hot."

"Naturally the sun is hot."

Yes it was hot, so very hot. The hard hot rays burning at my skin the moment I stepped outside, hot as a grill, a furnace.

Harry Zammitt moved closer in his buggy, and other buggies were rolling into the sunspot now.

"Marina—you must stand against the buggy—no, better, bend your body back, sprawl backwards over the hood, lie on it—but keep your eyes closed or you'll be blinded."

"You can't make love to me across a car," she whined feebly, moving in a daze, wincing as her body touched the heating metal. "It hurts."

"It's a buggy," said I. "Lie back, damn you, lover. Across the hood of my buggy."

"You animal, you primitive animal," she mumbled, doing

just as I said, spreading herself across the hood with her eyes screwed shut. For her this was the climax that confirmed all her fears and lusts for such scum as myself. Oh Marina!

For me the climax was different.

(Had I ever tried to warn you—had I? Who was I now, Considine the human being, or Considine the Priest of the Sun? Liar Considine, how you enjoyed being possessed—how you enjoyed the sanctification of your torture, in order to achieve the torture of sanctity—Marina!)

I, Considine, Priest of the Sun, snatched the obsidian knife from my pocket and brought it slashing down into your chest.

A pretty mess I made of you. The Aztecs must have had dozens of prisoners to practice on. At one blow! Monkeys maybe. Maybe they executed monkeys in the dark rooms under the temple pyramids. By the time I had hacked through the chaos of smashed ribs, torn breast muscle, flesh, that had been your body and my guide—by the time I had trapped the palpitating blood-sodden rag of your heart in my fist and wrenched it free—by that time I was vomiting onto the black soil.

(Soil that showed no signs of the flash harvest of grass and tiny blooms we all looked for, though it had been sprinkled with blood—as was I.)

My mouth putrid with bile, I turned, held your heart, Marina, high, dripping, to the blazing hurtful sun that blistered my skin raw as a flayed criminal's.

"What are you doing Considine!" screamed the Magnificent Amberson, plunging toward me across the black earth—for he had finally got here, in the wake of some of his followers—sheltering himself under a sheet of metal.

"Sacrificing," said I. "As the sun god requires."

"Sun god?" he snarled.

"Tezcatlipoca has been reborn in the sky—surely you see?"

"Bloodthirsty maniac—I don't care about that—I can't see anything up there! Where has the ozone cover gone?"

I turned to Amberson then blankly, still clutching the wet heart.

"What?"

"The ozone layer in the upper air, don't you realize it's gone? Met Central is shouting murder about it. The hard radiation is getting through. You're burning to death if you stay out here. That's why there's no harvest, you fool. Scattering blood around isn't going to help!"

I dropped the heart on the ground, where it lay bubbling

gently, tiny bubbles of blood, into the unresponsive warming soil.

Amberson snatched at me, maybe to drag me under the metal sheet with him, but I shook him off and jumped into my buggy, locked the doors, opaqued the windows.

And sat trembling there with the obsidian blade freshly blooded in my lap.

"Considine!" cried voices over the radiophone.

"Considine?" Amberson's voice—he was back in his sun buggy.

"Yes. I'm here."

"Now hear me, sun runners all, Considine led you here, and I admit I don't know how. But now maybe he'd like to explain why we can't go outside without being burnt, and where the harvest is?"

I said nothing.

"No? I'll tell you. Anyway, it's coming over Met Central. The ozone layer in the upper air has finally broken down—the pollution has gotten to it and changed it—and as the ozone layer just happens to be what filters out of the hard radiation from the sun, we had better get the hell out of here. Reflecting—as we do—on the demise of the honourable sport of the sun hunt. From now on anyone who spots the sun is going to wish himself a hundred miles away. So get going sun runners. And bugged you Considine. Let's all know this as Considine's Sunspot—the last sunspot anyone ever hunted for. A nice curse to remember a bloodthirsty fool by!"

Tezcatlipoca, why had you cheated me? Did her blood not flow like milk to your satisfaction? Was it because I botched the sacrifice so clumsily? Where the Aztec priest used one swift blow of the knife to unsheath the heart, I used twenty . . .

One thing Amberson was wrong about. The biggest thing of all. The thing that has given me my present role, more hated than Amberson could ever have dreamed as he uttered his curse upon me.

For Considine's Sunspot was not going to close up, ever. It carried on expanding, taking in more acres hour by hour.

Far more than the ozonosphere had altered in those chemical mutations of the past few hours. The pall of dirt that had blanketed the Earth so many years was swift to change, whatever new catalyst it was that had found a home in the smog; now, starting at one point and spreading outward, the catalyst

preceding (swimming like a living thing—Snowflake's "childish" nightmare!) on a wave front from the point of light, the changed smog yielding to the hard radiations of the naked sun.

I was right—which is the horror of it—I was right. Tezcatlipoca is alive again, but no friend to man. Nor was he ever friend to man, but cheated and betrayed him systematically with his magic, and his song, and his stink. Tezcatlipoca, vicious bear, hideous giant coming head in hand, bounding jaguar, using me as focus for his flames, as plainly as he used Marina (my lost love!) for his map.

Considine's Sunspot spreads rapidly from one day to the next, gathering strength, sterilising further areas of the country, burning the earth clean. Algae beds consumed faster than they can be covered over. Fuller domes shrivelling, flimsy-fabriced. Buildings in flames, so brittle. The asphalt motorways blazing fifty-mile-long tinder strips.

So let me be Priest of the Burning World then, since it is what I foretold and since, strangely (is it so strangely in these fear-crazed times?), the cult of Tezcatlipoca has revived, at least its ceremonies have, blood sacrifices carried out in the polluted zones beyond the encroaching flame front, in vain hopes of stemming it—oh, they only add fuel to the sun's fire!—with their cockerels and bullocks stolen from the zoo sheds . . . and people too, captive and volunteer—beating hearts torn out by far more expert hands than mine, tossed blindly at where the sun burns its way toward them. And, what no one will volunteer for, the flame kindled in the darkness on someone's writhing scream-torn body, to impress the god of fire—Xiuhtecuhtli—oh yes, modern scholarship is on our side! And after further scholarly researches (did not witchcraft almost win a World War?) babies are cooked alive, eaten in honour of Tlaloc, god of rains and springs, who waters the earth. Outlaws and inlaws, bandits and wasps—we are all in this together, now.

My fate, Wandering Jew of the burning roads, is to lurk outward and ever outward, casting around the perimeter of Sunspot Considine, buggy rationed and fueled free of charge, with hatred, meeting up with my worshipers, torturers, meteorologists (has not meteorology absorbed all the other sciences?), time and again overcome by a craze of words bubbling from Tezcatlipoca's lips—taunts, demands, tricks and curses fluttering through my mouth from elsewhere, like captive birds set free, like the souls of his victims escaping into the sky.

And I ask:

Why me?

And:

Why you, Marina?

How I love you, in retrospect, having held your beating heart within my palm!

And the sunspot that bears my name, great tract of flame-land seared into the world, pre-Cambrian zone of sun-scarred earth sterile except for the bacteria lying in waiting for some million-year-to-come event—do you realize that logically the whole world will bear my name one day, if the sunspot expands to embrace it, though no one will be here to use the name—of Considine's Planet (as it may be known to the ghosts upon it)—why am I not allowed to drive in there and die? But the mad sun god will not allow it, while yet he holds me dangling on a string, jerking my vocal chords as it amuses him. Since I plucked her heart out I am his creature utterly. As she was mine, and earlier still as I was hers. So it rolls around.

Once I was a free man, sun hunter, outlaw. Now, a potential planet—and a slave. The empty gift of omnipotence! Considine's world—naked pre-Cambrian of some future society of insects, perhaps!

Marina.

Whose heart I felt flutter in my hand.

Thy blood like milk for me has flowed, hot as iron pouring from a furnace!

Marina and Considine.

Eve and Adam of the world's end, our non-love brought life to its close, victim and executioner of the vanishing smog-scape—which we all long for nowadays, passionately, and would sacrifice anything, or anyone to bring it back to us.

This tale is for the sun god, Tezcatlipoca, with my curses, and for you, Marina . . .

AURORA IN ZENITH

GORDON ABBOTT

CHAPTER 1:

In which, as the spaceship Aurora passes through the Prime Zenith of the Galaxy, one of the passengers, named Arnold Glaisher, sends a laser-gram to Earth giving details of his discovery of discontinuous atomic matter in space. Shortly after he has done this the Aurora is taken over by a group of aliens calling themselves the Quesnoy who have blue and red skin and seven fingers to each hand.

CHAPTER 2:

In which Glaisher's laser-gram reaches the Earth. It is taken before the Council of Scientists, one of whom, called Ronald Kahan, sends a message back to the Aurora asking for further information. While he is waiting for a reply Kahan discovers that his wife Sheila has been unfaithful. She has run off with a neutron-controller called Vygus Wobern. The absconding couple had bought a trip to the Drift, the nearest part of the Galaxy that was beyond the authority of the United Nations Court. The Drift consisted mainly of a strange expanse of gas and plasma, with a few planets interspersed between it. Strange time-effects were known to exist there.

CHAPTER 3:

How Ronald Kahan was so angered upon receiving this information that he almost forgot the communication he had sent to the Aurora; but how the extraordinary reply he received brought his mind back to it. The reply was not, as intended, from Arnold Glaisher concerning his discovery, but from the Quesnoy aliens. They said that they had taken over the Aurora. According to the Quesnoy they had no knowledge of the Earth and had captured the spaceship solely in order to find out more about the planet. This laser-gram from the aliens was written in aUI, the language of space. Upon receiving it Kahan immediately convened an emergency session of the Council of Scientists.

CHAPTER 4:

In which Kahan put before the Council the two messages. He told the scientists that both were of great importance. Arnold Glaisher's claim to have found discontinuous atomic matter in space could prove vital in breaking through the current deadlock in nuclear physics. And of course any communications with a new group of extraterrestrials was always of great importance. He therefore proposed that one of the multipurpose Star-liners now in use should be immediately dispatched to investigate both matters. The Council voted in favour of his proposal. They next voted as to which members of the Council should go on the Star-liner mission. Ronald Kahan was one of those elected to go, as he had planned,

CHAPTER 5:]

In which the Star-liner is launched. Within days it has travelled a hundred light-years from Earth. Kahan goes to the Helmsman and suggests that as a respected member of the Council of Scientists he, Kahan, is best fitted to choose their destinations. The Helmsman agrees. Kahan then suggests that first they go

to the Drift. The Helmsman is mystified but reluctantly complies. Kahan is in fact acting with an ulterior motive: he plans to surprise his absconded wife Sheila and Vygus Wobern before going on to confront the mystery of the Quesnoy and Arnold Glaisher. The Star-liner arrives in the Drift. Secretly Kahan radios the six inhabitable Drift planets, asking for their mandatory lists of new-comers during the past month. They all reply to say that any such newcomers would not be allowed on the planets yet, but would rather be on the Main Quarantine Asteroid for the time being.

CHAPTER 6:

In which Kahan takes one of the scoutships down to the Quarantine Asteroid while the Star-liner is held motionless in space ready for his return. Once there he discovers that there are only about 200 people in quarantine waiting to be allowed on to the Drift planets. From these he easily manages to detect his wife Sheila and Vygus Wobern. Kahan demands that his wife come back to the Star-liner with him. To his surprise she agrees to. He had feared that she would use her right to diplomatic immunity. Sheila's only condition is that Vygus Wobern should come to the Star-liner with her. Because of the other matters of pressing urgency Kahan is forced to give in to this demand.

CHAPTER 7:

In which Kahan brings the scoutship back to the Star-liner with his wife and Vygus Wobern. Briefly he explains to the Helmsman his reason for bringing them on board. They prepare to leave the Drift. Unfortunately they find it difficult to get their proper co-ordinate because of the distorting effect of the strange mixture of gas and plasma within the Drift. When they finally think that they have got the problem solved the outer hull of the ship touches a small but powerful sphere of anti-matter within the Drift. By the force of the explosion that follows their ship is thrown deep into space.

CHAPTER 8:

How, although the Star-liner is far off course, its powerful motors manage to get it to destination in the Prime Zenith. This was where the Aurora had last been heard from. However during the journey there occurred to Kahan a strange series of events. Looking at his wife, who was virtually confined to the spacious quarters of the ship, it seemed to him that from time to time he saw her appear doubly. More concretely he was certain that he saw her walking down the corridors of the ship when he was sure that she was in her quarters. Others reported seeing doubles of Vygus Wobern, too. Kahan confronted her about it. She said she didn't know what he was talking about, but if he was telling the truth about what he saw it could be one of the notorious time-distortion effects carried over from when they had been in the Drift. Her image must have become split in time.

CHAPTER 9:|

In which the Star-liner reaches the position from where the Aurora was last heard. As anticipated it was no longer there, but in being moved by the Quesnoy it had left a faint trail of electrons which it was possible for the sensitive instruments on the Star-liner to follow. They travelled for twelve light-years following this trail. At the end of this distance instruments in the Star-liner told them that they were very near to the Aurora. Kahan guessed that this was the vicinity from which the Quesnoy aliens originated. A Quesnoy ship appeared. For a while the aliens within it attempted to take over the Star-liner in the same way that they had the Aurora but this vessel had much better defences.

CHAPTER 10:|

In which Kahan thought that they could fight off this attack. But no sooner did they appear to be winning against this

Quesnoy vessel than others appeared in space around them. And others. Finally all space around them was studded with the sophisticated Quesnoy ships, each placed at geometric positions to each other. Realising that against such numbers battle would be hopeless Kahan tries to get in touch with the aliens through the vision screens on his ship.

CHAPTER 11:]

In which the Quesnoy finally establishes visual contact. The face of an alien, whose skin is coloured entirely by blotches of blue and red and who reveals seven long slender fingers whenever he lifts up his hand, appears on the screen. Ronald Kahan and the alien converse in aUI, a language intelligible even between beings from different galaxies. Kahan asks for the release of the people on the Aurora. The alien says they will be released when the Quesnoy have examined them properly and will not be harmed. Kahan says that he doubts this. The alien says that he will go so far as to allowing a small number of people from the Star-liner to examine the captives from the Aurora to see that no damage is being done to them.

CHAPTER 12:'

In which Kahan expects a trap upon hearing this offer from the alien. He thinks it over. An idea occurs to him. He asks for his wife and Vygus Wobern to be brought to him. They are. He explains to them what the alien had said to him. Then he tells them his idea: It is for the two of them to go with the Quesnoy to inspect the prisoners from the Aurora to see that they are all right. They are reluctant to do so at first. Wobern asks how they know they won't be kept prisoner like the others. Kahan answers him merely by saying that if they do this for him he won't take legal action against them in the United Nations Court on Earth for their infidelity to him, knowing that is an offer they cannot turn down.

CHAPTER 13:]

In which Sheila Kahan and Vygus Wobern are ferried across to the ship of the Quesnoy which takes them down to Quesno, the planet that is the home of the aliens. From there they go to a large circular building. It is in the confines of this that the prisoners from the Aurora are being examined. They go inside. From this inner position they can see many circular levels, like the systems of Dante's Hell. They are guided through these levels. Finally they reach one of the special partitioned levels, where the alien tells them to stop. They look in the direction to which he points and see a long level of about a 112 people. These are those taken from the Aurora. All of them now have many wires attached to their bodies and electrodes fitted to their heads.

CHAPTER 14:]

In which Sheila Kahan protests at the conditions in which the humans are being kept. The alien replies that although they might not be used to undergoing such treatment, the aliens' techniques were very advanced, so they were in no danger. Sheila played a high card. She said to one of the aliens that if what he said was true he would have no objection to releasing one of the prisoners to go with her back to the ship, because then he would still have 111 left to examine their biological structure. To her surprise the alien agreed to her request. To prove that all of the captive humans were perfectly well though unconscious under all the wires that were attached to them the alien said she could choose herself which one would be revived in order to go back to the ship with them. This was a stroke of luck. Immediately she chose Arnold Glaisher, because she knew he was the most important to the people on the ship. The alien complied with her request. He unclipped the wires from about Glaisher, and after he had given him an injection he came completely back to life.

CHAPTER 15:]

In which they ascend back to the Star-liner with Glaisher. After routine medical checks have been run Kahan requests for Glaisher to be sent to him. He talk to Glaisher about his experiences and learns that despite the extensive tests that have been run on them the people from the Aurora had not been harmed by the Quesnoy. The aliens do not appear to be unfriendly. Next Kahan comes to the crux of the matter. He asks Glaisher if he can write down the full details of his discovery of discontinuous atomic matter in space. Glaisher proceeds to do so.

CHAPTER 16:]

In which Kahan examines Glaisher's figures once he has finished them. The figures state that the special atomic matter can only be found in certain parts of the Universe. Glaisher had added a recommendation that the Star-liner should go to seek it in these areas since in his view the Quesnoy aliens were not hostile, despite their strange actions. And little could be gained by remaining here to keep an eye on them. Kahan finally acquiesced with these views. The ship moved off in the direction of that part of the Galaxy that contained Glaisher's discovery.

CHAPTER 17:]

In which the Star-liner moves slightly away from the Prime Zenith of the Galaxy. In its new position, and with the remarkable equipment it has on board, it is soon able to detect the special, vacuum-produced atomic matter that Glaisher has predicted. Because this substance exists for only fractions of a moment at a time it cannot be usefully employed by man, but from the spectrograph readings taken by the crew it is possible to synthesize it in Earth laboratories, thus ending the deadlock in physics. Sheila agrees to go back to Ronald Kahan, but in

doing so conceals a fact from him. This fact is that the time-distortion effect which has become gradually more pronounced since her time in the Drift, finally reaches its culmination and the time-flux splits her completely into two personifications. Whilst one of these personifications is quite willing to stay with Kahan the other wishes to go off with Vygus Wobern, and since the two parts exist now in different space-times both entities are able to follow their whims. The half of Sheila Kahan that has gone off with Vygus Wobern ventures deep into space and with Wobern supplies the aliens known as the Quesnoys with much more information that they want to know about the people of Earth.

DISINTEGRATION

MICHAEL BUTTERWOTTH

"We first met one another at Manchester University. She was reading psychology, and I was taking a printing diploma at a nearby art college. We both had similar interests, and opposite characters.

"I think that I was the more stable of the two. She was frightened of life, and unsure of herself. Her interest in psychology was most probably in part a symptom of her state of mind, for I rarely got the impression that she was studying for the sake of her career. It was a strange choice for her, and it didn't really lead her anywhere except, as I now see, deeper into her own mind."

Because of her fear of people, she had no faith in human nature. In the case of ninety-nine per cent of people she met, I would say that she had good cause to suspect their motives towards her. But she could not bring herself to trust even the one per cent of people who are always trustworthy and warm of affection. I fell in love with her. But it took me six years of married life to convince her of that fact.

"We married suddenly, two months after we had met. I gave up my printing course; she decided to stay on at university. I was a bit irritated at this, though I hid my feelings and encouraged her, in the hope that she would one day come out of her shell and think of her career and her future rather than use, as she did, her psychology course as a tool with which to dwell upon the past."

And what a past! She was the product of a dissatisfied marriage, of parents who argued continually, and who looked upon their children as a source of their unhappiness. As she was the most sensitive of the three, she was also the one who grew up most affected by the obvious rift in her parents' relationship, and by the harsh beatings which they meted out.

"We had a succession of flats, and eventually a house and children of our own. Her course at the university was completed, though as I suspected she would she failed the final examination. As, by this time, I had won over her confidence, she was not too upset. She did not attempt to resit the exam, but resigned herself instead to family life with me.

"All went well for a number of years until one morning we had a cable sent to us from an old friend, who in the interim had become head of a psychic research centre on Hebrides. Neither she nor I had severed relationships with our old friends, and kept ourselves thoroughly up to date with regard to their work. A mound of literature came through our door each week, the outcome of subscriptions to just about every relevant journal on psychic research."

I suppose that, having exhausted its search for knowledge on the purely physical plain, and succeeded in conquering its birth planet and also interstellar space, the human race felt that it was now beneficial to its survival to turn its attention inwards, at its origin. There were still many social and living problems that had to be solved amongst the inhabitants of earth. Psychic research, scientific investigation of the previously scorned powers of the human mind, such as telepathy, telekinesis, the power to create, and so on, was one of the sciences which became popular.

"Thom's cable could not have come at a better time for her and me, who were at the peak of a scientific hubbub. It stated briefly that he needed guinea pigs to help work a consciousness-swapping experiment. He remembered that she was a particularly susceptible person, with an easily opened mind, ideally suited. Because he could think of 'absolutely no one else' he had been forced to turn to us, despite our family ties. We both agreed to help him, a rather foolish decision I now admit."

At the time, however, we were blinded by an altruistic feeling of desire to martyr ourselves for the sake of scientific advancement.

"We had some guilty feelings about leaving our children but, we reasoned, the research would not take more than a few weeks at most and we would soon return.

"We left our children in care of an aunt, paid off a few months mortgage repayments on the house, and left at once for Hebred, all expenses paid by courtesy of the Lockwood Psychic Research Foundation.

"Thom—Dr Thomas Brown—is a fat, perspiring man, very patient and dedicated. As is the case with most professional men that I have met, he has cultivated a kind of dual character: humanely considerate on the one hand, a ruthless exploiter on the other, an ideal formula for a man to adopt who has both family and self-survival interests at heart. But in Thom, the instinct to survive . . ."

. . . sublimated nowadays as scientific rather than geographical exploration of man's unknown territory . . .

". . . has gained the upper hand. Although he likes to be a responsible and a considerate sort of person, his thirst for knowledge causes him to have a unique morality unparalleled in any other person, except perhaps in the monstrous scientists of the old horror movies, who used fellow humans in the performance of some cruel experiment or other."

He isn't consciously aware of the way in which he exploits people and situations. As is the case with most professional men, the subject's compliance is accepted as the effluvium of pure good-naturedness. It does not occur to him that the subject is unaware of real danger, and that his enthusiasm is the enthusiasm of the innocent: well-intentioned but foolhardy. In the professional mind, the subject is endowed with mutual understanding and absolute knowledge of the conditions. It was with this sort of mental framework that Thom accepted our decision to help.

"He received us well, and entertained us with dinners, drinks and stories. The conversation for much of the time was to do with psychiatry and psychology in general, about people in the field, and about advancements being made. It was pretty evident that he thought that his foundation was on to a pretty shattering breakthrough. The idea, he told us, was one that had procured him rapturous visions throughout his adult life: of a world in which communication between one human being and another could become absolute. It was not only his vision: total communication of the sort he envisaged has always been a preoccupation of the thoughts of civilised man. But Thom had been especially haunted by the idea, and the situation as we found it at his foundation was, that after years of study as a student, and after years of research as a professional, he had managed to design an apparatus which he was confident could not only record human thought but also transmit thought from one human being to another."

As yet, a thought could be transmitted no great distance, only the length of a piece of cable: in order to receive and transmit at all, the brains of two participants had to be attached by cable to the apparatus,

one transmitting his thoughts into the apparatus, and the other receiving the same thoughts from it. In effect the apparatus was a media device, and although a block in the development of instantaneous communication (telepathy) it was nevertheless a step in the right direction. It was the first stage, and Thom was justifiably a proud man.

"We were shown the apparatus and a date was fixed for the experiment. Because of the numerous experimental conditions that had to be right before the major experiment could take place, we were, in the meantime, kept busy performing tests, on ourselves and on the apparatus. One of the tests, I remember, was arranged to determine the speed of flow of our thoughts, another determined the clarity of our thinking, and so on. In order to test the equipment, a one word thought of mine was successfully transmitted to her."

Thom had told us that actual thought transference, once considered a remarkable achievement in itself, was accomplished daily by his laboratory staff, and was only used now as a test to be performed upon a slightly modified version of the original apparatus. What Thom now wanted was the transference of one entire *mind* into the mind of another. As a basis for this idea, he had worked on the assumption that the computation of one single thought could be altered to cope with the transference of an entire matrix of particles, or thought waves. The computation would be incredibly complicated, but he had a reliable computer and a team of skilled staff, so he was confident of success.

"The day arrived at last. We had been waiting in nervous anticipation of this moment. She was wired up first, then I. There were no electrodes, only a sheet of what Thom called 'thought-sensitive' material, which was fitted to the inside of a rubber cap. This cap was tailored to cover the whole head, neck, chest and back. The only inlet was an air pipe, which fed our noses."

From her head-piece a maze of coloured wires led into a row of input sockets on the instrument (I say 'instrument'—in fact the apparatus was composed of many instruments so voluminous that they more or less filled our laboratory), for the idea at first was to transfer her mind into mine. My head-piece was thus attached by wires to a row of output sockets. After a while, Thom told us, it would be possible, by throwing a switch, to reverse the flow: my mind in her body, her mind in my body. The third stage of the experiment (and the highlight) would be the evacuation of both our minds from our bodies. Our separate minds would be stored in separate banks of the computer, and we would be allowed to communicate at a speed approaching that of thought. Fourthly, our minds would be returned to our bodies, the computer's memory having recorded every detail of the strange encounter of minds.

Some hours were spent by technicians fiddling with bits of the apparatus, in order to stabilise conditions. Then Thom gave the order to commence. Juice was turned on, and I began to feel the familiar

tingling in my brain cells that had characterised earlier experiments when we had been engaged in the transference of single thoughts. Then, without warning, my senses were cut off—an entirely new experience. I could not see, hear, feel, taste, or touch. My first reaction was to panic, but as the state was not altogether uncomfortable (in fact it was quite pleasant), I soon calmed down. It was a bit like being in a sleep state, where, identically, the five senses are curtailed. But, by contrast, I retained awareness: not the familiar awareness of my five known senses, but, presumably, that of my mystical 'sixth' sense. My psychic state also differed from my normal sleep state in that I experienced no dreaming, though I felt that, had the dream imagery come to me, I could easily have controlled it. This was a pleasant feeling, for I have long desired to be able to control my dreams.

There were no images—only void. I could not sense the particles which made up my new body. I knew I was, and that I was 'there', and that was all. The condition did not alarm me, nor was it boring. I felt contented.

After a while I became conscious of an approaching 'something', which I assumed must be her. A moment later, her consciousness had merged with mine. Hers was quite different to my own, and its approach had filled me with anxiety. I realised why as soon as we became one mind: she was frightened, and could not succumb to the relaxation which had overcome me. She was full of spikes and filled me with gaps. No words were exchanged, only feelings. By conveying to her a feeling of protection, I was able to calm her somewhat. A great part of her fright was also dispelled at having found something to hide in. She had hardly had time to pulse more than a wave or so of her sweet feelings of gratitude into me, than I felt myself suddenly grow distant from her.

I found myself in an area much the same as the first had been, before I had been joined by her, and assumed that Thom had now transferred my mind into her unoccupied brain. I felt pleasure, for the experiment was progressing well, and the second stage was almost over. But I was concerned for my partner, and hoped that by now she had overcome her fears. But she had not, and I think that it was possibly her resistance to the whole affair that brought about her fate. Thom,

absorbed by the manipulation of our minds, had neglected to provide us with any means of communication with the world he inhabited. She could not protest.

She had been moved pawn-like to an area identical with mine but separate from it. I was made aware of this fact by her extremely clear thoughts that pierced through the void like needles. On this occasion, no doubt because of our detachment from one another, our thoughts were transmitted in the form of words and pictures, as well as feelings. She was still in a state of panic, but having realised that I was close by, and that so far there had been no catastrophe, she communicated with greater objectivity.

She told me that it had been silly of her to have behaved the way she had, and of how lost she had felt when Thom had suddenly taken me from her. What she said sounded ridiculous. I laughed, for the picture that her words invoked in me was one of Thom and I having an affair. Part of me knew that this interpretation was not what she had meant, and perfectly understood her real meaning, but it seemed to me that this sort of punning and literal acceptance of words was acceptable to both of us, even desirable. I had a tendency to want to break down the conditioning power of words, which I saw as invented tools that only partially did their designed job of controlling communicated *true* feeling. She must have agreed with me, for a moment later she 'laughed'.

After we had made a pact not to use words except for the conveyance of specific information, we each settled down to our own 'place', meaning to become more intimately attached. (The area between us was a sharp barrier, separating us by what seemed infinity, which was in actual fact only a few computer banks. Living in this mental limbo, was an existence uncomplicated by quantified physical measurements of space, matter, and time, for the three elements did not exist in quite the same way as they appear to exist to us out here in the five-sense world.)

There was not much time to spend together before I was suddenly made conscious of the fact that communication from her had ceased. That moment was the worst I have experienced in my life. There was a sort of 'explosion' of images from her, in which her mind was completely opened and laid bare.

Her entire life's experiences came out, a human wreckage that floated in pieces through my existence. Instantly I knew everything about her, who she was, and why she was. My understanding of her as a person, gained over

long years of marriage, was nothing compared with the intensity with which I knew her in that single instant. The frail, unworkable structure she had given her mind, with the desperate intention to stave off the 'cruelties' of life, had collapsed. The grim determination she had used to hold it all together, was dissipated. Then, as quickly, every trace of her mind had gone, melted like overnight snow. There was no question of her merely having stopped communicating. She had gone. Simultaneously, I received a terrible pain that burst explosively from my 'centre' and that spread outwards towards my extremities. I endured this for a split second. Then I 'awoke'.

Images of the laboratory were swimming before my eyes, jumbled and incoherent. My hand was pressed against my head, to ease the pain which had somehow concentrated there. Thom's face came into my field of vision, someone pulled down my arms, and my headpiece was removed. I lost consciousness and awoke in bed in the foundation sick room.

"Later, Thom came in to inform me that she was dead. That's really where the story ends, except to say that the news that Thom brought to me was already old in my head. I had experienced her death alongside her.

"After making arrangements for her disintegration, I left Hebred with a bad headache and one or two other ailments that come and go, symptoms which Thom assures me will clear up gradually over a period of years. Not much comfort."

"And she was right," my listener interrupted. "Thom had taken you away from her."

"Yes. Only not in the manner we had thought, ironically. There's been no affair!" I managed a sardonic laugh. "I view it all as a scientific experiment—a very good one—that went

wrong. Thom was as white as death, the most upset man I have seen. He was 90% directly responsible for her death."

My listener drew me to her. I let her cradle me, but I could feel no emotion of the kind she might have expected me to have. My mind was still too much preoccupied with thoughts of unfaithfulness. I lay stiffly against her breast. Whether she realised my dilemma or not, I could not say, but a moment later she let me go. I arose and rescued my drink from the bar top where I had left it half an hour ago.

FILLING US UP

M. JOHN HARRISON

I only ever went to one science fiction convention. Someone with a goatee beard was talking about bicycle wheels and a thing he called "modern art"—a phrase which for some reason is always used to describe the art of twenty years ago—when a woman at the back of the hall popped up like a Punch and Judy show and called out in a pained, revelatory sort of voice:

"But fiction isn't *art*, is it? It's entertainment."

And she sat down again abruptly with one hand tangled in her hair and the other clutching a ball of Kleenex. (She was worn out; she suffered the rest of the talk like a mad stone, only her lips moving, and those silently.) The speaker was bemused for only a moment; quickly, he raised his voice and went on.

It was my introduction to philosophy, both natural and moral, as an aspect of the bar-room argument and the *Readers' Letters* column, where inspiration replaces induction and thoughts flit through the pervasive gloom like small, elusive fish or detonate like the flash bulb in the IDEA! balloon to leave their recipients blinking and dazed and grinning uncomfortably.

"Generalisations, of course," Gosforth started, "But all the same . . . Now, science had its first flicker in ancient Greece, right? The intrigue of ideas, of finding rational causes for things. But in a slave state, so no pressure to try the ideas in practice."

John Rackham, *Ipomoea*

There's something engagingly furtive about this vision of science as a callow lad, nipping off behind the Parthenon with Archimedes for his first experiment—a quick, guilty fumble, perhaps, with the concept of displacement. But you can't afford the time to support your assumptions or argue by anything other than dead metaphor when you're shouting to be heard over the racket they're making at, say, Michael G. Coney's table:

“Does there have to be a reason for anything? What is the reason for Man?”

“Oh, for God's sake,” snapped Briggs. “Don't go all philosophical on me. There's always some sort of reason, granted the initial existence of life.”

Michael G. Coney, *Mirror Image*

This is how thinking is done in sf: conversationally. Inevitable, then, that it should fall down all the holes that conversation is heir to—side-tracking, argument from the wrong side of the analogy, rhetoric as a substitute for logic, the accidental modification of premises (or even subject matter). It is not rigorous. Its vocabulary consists almost wholly of terms like “granted” and “posit”, “given” and “for the sake of argument”; its grammar is punctuative, the oratorical “right?” and “agreed?” used as fish-glue to cement unrelated items; its impromptu syntax reflects its impromptu reasoning; it is a muck of colloquialisms and jargon words used outside their proper fields.

No warmer or darker place could be conceived for the equally inevitable generation of those paternalistic intellectual bullies first-beloved of Heinlein, always ready to fix the reader with a stern blue eye and recite, “Let me tell you, son, that I know a parameter when I see one. The monad theory of externalisation of our permutative geoneurosis quanta is alien crap, and I'd bust Kant's nose for saying it isn't. Right? So let's hear you cry uncle, son, or I'll paddle your ass with my Occam's Razor strop. Don't they make you kids read books any more?”—or to assent with Piers Anthony's Borland: ‘Us lowbrows get to the root, sometimes. Not always.’” These are the primitive geniuses of the genre—dummies for the primitive ventriloquists who display them.

It's hardly surprising, then, to discover that the so-called

“extrapolation” (an entirely figurative expression in this case, another piece of jargon gone astray) which is the vaunted basis of science fiction, appears to issue from the same murky incubator. This is the sole and complete rationale of a novel called *Alph*, by Charles Eric Maine, in which we find the Earth populated wholly by women (doesn’t that just give you a *frisson*? I think it’s meant to):

It was the Pill that did it—that long-term sterilising tablet named Sterilin. Just one dose a year and a woman could forget about pregnancy. That was when the rot set in—the decay of moral standards, the era of penis and vagina worship. But from blind nature’s point of view all that had happened was that the female sex had become progressively infertile. And, of course, nature compensated as she always does. If females were infertile, there was a need for more and more female births to redress the balance, and so gradually over the years more and more girls were born and fewer and fewer boys.

Like the raggy clout of argument Donald A. Wollheim draws about himself in *The Universe Makers* (see N.W.Q.5.), the above has so many holes that it’s difficult to determine which one lets in the most wind. And, of course, it isn’t a projection from known terms even in the figurative sense.

It rests on an absolutely absurd personification of nature; on what one can only interpret as a profound misunderstanding of how the sex of the child is determined; on a vagueness of terminology which (by presenting the word “tablet”, for instance), facily evades any definition of the *substance* of Sterilin and leaves the reader unable to decide whether “nature” might not in this instance be some biochemical side-effect of the medication; and on several contradictions in its own terms, not the least of which is this:

Accepting nature as an omnipotent entity (Maine leaves us so very little alternative), and accepting that “she” acts in what seems to her to be the best interest of the continuation of a species when its females appear to be becoming sterile, why does she not act quite as “blindly” in the same interest when it becomes plain that its males are *actually* on the decline?

Well, she does it as a punishment.

This “extrapolation” is nothing more than bait in a moral trap set by the author, a typically conversational hash of

"evidence" modified from accounts of present-day research into the side-effects of hormonal contraception (evidence that he doesn't produce, but is content to imply), coupled with an unsupported value-judgement—the notion that, somehow, contraception is a way of getting something for nothing, of avoiding the traditional punishment for promiscuity.

It is, in fact, the wrath of God. And the best one can say so far of the "science" in this fiction is that it would seem to be based on the dictum, "If you don't stop doing that, young Johnny, nature will go blind."

It's significant that the subject is topical. This is one side of a debate you can hear in any public bar on any night of the week—and it's similarly ill-informed, ill-expressed and larded with prejudice—that last a word which might well be used to replace the fashionable euphemism "personal opinion".

The rest of *Alph* is in similar condition. "You have committed a criminal act by any code of conduct," seems fair enough if you're willing to commit the entire field of comparative anthropology to the dustbin; but the most cursory linguistic analysis leaves it in strips. And a writer who chucks about the words "microcytology" and "RNA modules" isn't very convincing when he follows them up with the sentence, "It was a miracle of patiently applied science that might not be repeated in a decade, or a century, or ever again." None of this is likely to inspire confidence in Maine's opinions—on the moral aspects of accessible contraception or anything else.

Distressingly, Maine is in no way exceptional. This type of thinking is very much the rule: it permeates the structure, plotting and characterisation of most sf; it raddles the prose; and it promotes the massive garbling of the social, theoretical and pseudo-sciences which has been a feature of the genre since the late Forties.

Throughout *Pstalemate*—another of those uncomfortable post-Sturgeon attempts to equate parapsychology with psychiatry, Rhine cards and Rorschach and the worst of both worlds—Lester Del Rey persists in treating the "laws of chance" as if they control events rather than describe them. "... It's quite a hand, and the odds against it are pretty high. Yet I know a lawyer named Charles Grimes who got it twice in one year." As if those "odds" were some palpable force straining against the will of the bridge player. After questioning the mathematics of probability because "They don't seem to work consistently" (by which he seems to mean that they

don't permit accurate prediction of the individual case), he offers us a final argument:

"I learned about mathematics and coincidence when I was young enough to believe in absolutes. I learned a lot about medical ethics at the same time, and it took several years of experience before I matured enough as a physician to have doubts . . . Nothing is as sure as we'd like."

Whatever he intended here, by inferring that apples are susceptible to the same weaknesses as fire-irons he has produced an analogy that's rotten to the core. And to what end? Respectability, one assumes; the garbing of fantasy in the decent weeds of scientific "possibility". His sole success is in making himself seem almost as pompous an ass as Charles Eric Maine.

In lieu of actual thought, Rackham and Coney offer brash, colloquial pontification, achieved through disembodied mouthpieces; Del Rey senses that "science" has something to do with careful reasoning, but embraces opinion instead; Maine bases his entire extrapolative argument on nothing more than a value-judgement, effectively bypassing the mouthpiece and presenting his cant direct.

Thought and prose cannot be considered as discrete states: the one modifies the other, to infinity. None of the above writers can make a precise, sensible prose, only a vague uncommunicative babble. Meanwhile, the IDEA! bulbs flash stroboscopically, and with each little explosion science fiction reels back, bemused by its own ability to think of things. With each brief illumination of the irresistible *notion*, the sense of its own importance grows.

The end result is a genre overcome and dazzled; muddled, flabby and self-opinionated. Sf: a literature of (poor) ideas, exchanging rigour for the inevitable *rigor*.

Back at John Rackham's table they've got the drinks in against closing time. The amateur sociologists and historians and technocrats are wiping foam off their lips. The pause that refreshes is over, and fragments of the eternal unformed rodomontade are drifting across the bar on a warm front of cigar smoke:

"We say—and we can prove . . . like the key principle in

cybernation . . . The energy of a finger movement on a switch can control millions of horsepower."

"That is simply the logical extension of your postulate."

"To a certain degree, everyone lives in a fantasy world . . ."

"You ivory tower boys can always make a good case."

Who can complain?—this is the style of the Seventies. The editorial toad has escaped from the centre pages; comment has eaten the news; punditry swallows both. The majority reveals itself as a broil of minorities, each convinced of its own indispensibility and itself comprised of as many minorities as it has adherents. We speak, eventually, in private languages. Fiction isn't *art*, is it?

Another great First for science fiction.

PSTALEMATE, by Lester Del Rey; Gollancz, £1.80

MIRROR IMAGE, by Michael G. Coney; DAW books, 95c

IPOMOEAE, by John Rackham; Dobson, £1.40

ALPH, by Charles Eric Maine; Ballantine, \$1.25

ALSO RECEIVED

From Dobson Books:

THE GLASS CAGE, by Kenneth W. Hassler. "He stifled a yarn"—misprint, or implacable self-honesty on the part of the author? £1.75.

THE YELLOW FRACTION, by Rex Gordon. £1.50. Politics on the planet Arcon. Halfway through the book, total confusion ensues. A hundred and fifty pence will buy you one of the cheaper cuts of meat.

RING OF GARAMAS, by John Rankine. Politics on the planet Garamas. Typical zippy Rankine adventure, very English, not a thought in its head, and why not? £1.75.

From Picador:

Two good reprints, Adrian Mitchell's THE BODYGUARD (40p), a vision of Britain under the thumb of the riot police—very thoughtful and sparely-written; and Angela Carter's beautiful, sincere HEROES & VILLAINS (40p). To call the latter a "disaster story" demeans it.

From Avon:

At \$1.25, the third edition of *MACROSCOPE*, the novel of which John Clute said "... Galactic in scope, mindbending (it has something to do with astrology), and a good read at over four hundred pages, if you don't mind Piers Anthony's style.

From DAW Books:

THE REGIMENTS OF NIGHT, by Brian N. Ball. Donald Wollheim keeps the Ace flag flying in his new home. "The gobbetting fury of the blaster's charge ..." and "Danecki took in the significance of the place. It had that indefinable air of restraint that characterises prisons. There was no doorway." Nothing like a doorless room to give you that subtle, shut in feeling. A snip at ninety-five cents.

TO CHALLENGE CHAOS, by Brian Stableford. Self-explanatory title. A group of people make their way to the dark side of Chaos X to find their true selves. None of them wonder if the journey was worth it. You might. 95c.

THE MIND BEHIND THE EYE, by Joseph Green. "A tour de force of the imagination. Not to be missed." *Sunday Times*. The *Sunday Times* is easily pleased. 95c.

From Ballantine:

WOLFWINTER, by Thomas Burnett Swan, \$1.95. Love and death among the satyr-woods beyond Sybaris. Sappho has a bit-part. Swan obviously loves recreating these old mythologies, but they can become wearying to the reader.

WHEN HARLIE WAS ONE

and

WITH A FINGER IN MY I, by David Gerrold, \$1.25 and 95c respectively. Ballantine's new superstar with a sentient-computer novel and a collection of short stories. In the latter, he reads a bit like the young Sturgeon, stimulating but undisciplined. But, like his other novel, *SPACE SKIMMER*, *WHEN HARLIE WAS ONE* is a disaster. More of a superplanet, really.

Probably to be reviewed fully next issue:

THE RUINS OF EARTH, edited by Thomas M. Disch, Hutchinson, £2.50. Published in the U.S. by Harper and Row.

An outstandingly good anthology—the only sf anthology this reviewer has been able to read in several years. The theme of the book is The Environment and what it does to us, what we do to it. In the hands of most editors such a subject would be a bore, but Disch is an editor with exceptional intelligence and taste (he has picked the one R. A. Lafferty story, for a start, I've ever enjoyed) and has combined sf and non-sf to make a particularly coherent statement on the theme. Good stories from Fritz Leiber, J. G. Ballard, Norman Rush and many more, some of them original, most never previously reprinted. Highly recommended.

MACHINES AND MEN by Keith Roberts, Hutchinson, £2.75.

Keith Roberts is one of the most consistently good writers in sf and yet this is the first time he has given us a collection of his short stories. A fine sampling of his work, published between 1964 and 1969, it includes *Manipulation*, *Escapism*, *Boulter's Canaries*, *Sub-Lim*, *Breakdown*, *Therapy 2000*, *The Deeps*, *Manscarer*, *Synth* and *The Pace That Kills*, most of them unavailable elsewhere. Excellent value. If anyone deserves the title of sf's Kipling it is Roberts, whose humanity is considerably closer to the earlier Kipling while his craftsmanship is closer to Kipling in his later (and best) years.

334 by Thomas M. Disch, MacGibbon and Kee, £2.25.

Could it be the title or the rather poor jacket on the English edition which caused this tremendously good novel to be ignored by most British critics when it came out last year? *Camp Concentration* had a similar fate and only recently have a large number of people become enthusiastic about it, five years after its original appearance. Parts of 334 appeared in NWQ. The novel presents a detailed picture of a New York in the near future, describing the lives and ambitions of a group of people living in a large apartment block (334 East 11th Street). Disch has broadened his range, shows considerably more profound psychological observation than in previous novels (which were remarkable, in sf, for their excellent observation), writes with humour and an impressive attention to detail. Above all, perhaps, he is wholly convincing. His characters are people living in what might seem to us to be hell, yet they are at ease with their environment because it is familiar to them. If 334 hadn't been published as sf Disch would have been in line for the Booker Prize at very least and would certainly have received the serious critical attention his work must

eventually get. Perhaps he is wasting his time working within the terms of sf. A fine novel.

A TRANSATLANTIC TUNNEL, HURRAH! by Harry Harrison, Faber and Faber, £1.90.

Harry Harrison's parallel world comedy is set in the heyday of a British Empire which has never lost its American holdings. Vast flying boats running on powdered coal, mechanical computers and atomic railway trains—a dreadnought technology eighty years on. But the hero of the piece is the tunnel itself, driven regardless by the brave navigators across the Biscay Abyssal Plane and the Oceanic Fracture Zones, a feat of massive Victoriana with a genuine flavour of Verne and *The Nautilus*, Brunel and the Great Western. There's a chilling picture of our reality-stream seen through the eyes of a medium, just bombs and blood. The humour is nicely understated, likely to raise a sustained smile rather than an actual laugh, and the whole thing is a very enjoyable read.

INTRODUCTION TO NEW READERS

CHARLES PLATT

For many years, as a magazine and now as a paperback collection, *New Worlds* has published a unique blend of genre science fiction and contemporary literature. It is difficult (and probably unwise) to try to categorize, but the label "speculative fiction" comes close to describing the stories in this book, meaning that they explore ideas and situations beyond everyday experience, in some cases using prose forms that are a little unconventional.

New Worlds began as a straight science fiction magazine in the forties, but shifted toward the freer and more literate "speculative" area in the mid-sixties, becoming the focal point for a movement of writers who were interested in the essence of science fiction but disillusioned with its lack of real innovation in form and content. Since then *New Worlds* has continued as a forum for such writers, and we have published imaginative, unusual stories whose roots in science fiction are sometimes still apparent but whose nature is really closer to the work of such writers as Kozynski, Borges, Barthelme or perhaps Vonnegut. A mixed selection of names, there; but that is because we are trying to describe a broad category of fiction which perhaps should not be thought of as a category at all. In this edition of *New Worlds* alone, you will find as many different approaches and outlooks as there are authors represented.

And yet, at the same time, few of these stories could have been accepted for publication anywhere *other* than *New Worlds*. So perhaps we are entitled to categorize them simply as "New Worlds stories", justifying our arrogance by noting that we are

still the only continuing paperback collection specializing in this particular free blend of new forms in fiction, applied to speculative subject matter.

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