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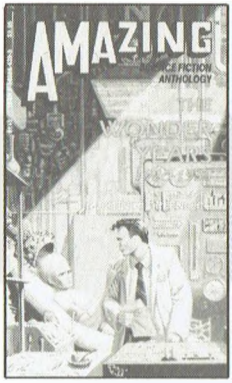

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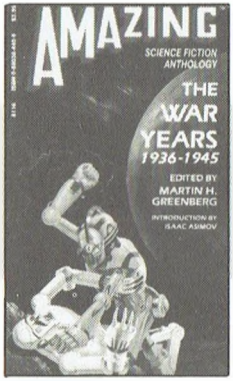

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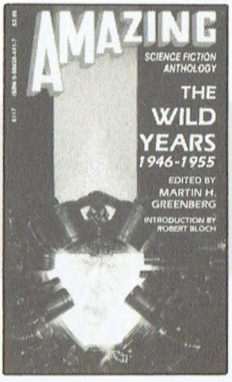

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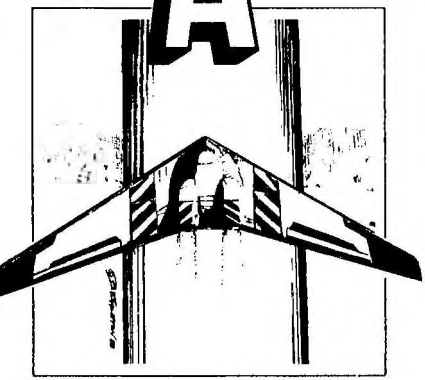

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Reflections

Robert Silverberg

I don't often quarrel, especially publicly, with reviews of my books. If the reviewer disagrees with me over the merits of something I've written, I generally shrug and turn to some more favorable review for consolation, and try to put the first one out of my mind. After all, I do the best I can with each book, and there's not much I can do to improve it once it's been published and reviewed. And, since each book is essentially an independent case, a blast against the current one is not very likely to help me to do a better job with my next.

But once in a while a review is so utterly wrong-headed that even the most aloof and detached of writers (and I can sometimes be that) is moved to cry out. Not, I hastily add, for the sake of salvaging my own wounded ego — no ego wounds were inflicted here — but to make an important point about how one goes about becoming a capable writer.

The case in point is the Virginia Kirkus Service review of a book called *Robert Silverberg's Worlds of Wonder*, which was published in 1987. (Warner Books, $17.95, and thanks for asking.) That book is not a novel by me, or a collection of short stories, but rather an anthology of the stories that most profoundly influenced me when I was first setting out to learn the craft of fiction — classic stories by C. L. Moore, James Blish, Damon Knight, Alfred Bester, Henry Kuttner, Brian Aldiss, Jack Vance, and half a dozen other notable SF writers. The stories are accompanied by a long autobiographical piece and by individual essays analyzing the technical means by which the writers achieved their effects.

Now, the Kirkus review is mostly a favorable one. It says that the book "succeeds beautifully on the first two counts" — the stories themselves, and the autobiographical essay, which Kirkus calls "thoughtful and illuminating." Where the book falters, says Kirkus, is in the essays on the individual stories.

"The instructional aspect here . . . is troublesome," the anonymous Kirkus reviewer declares. "As Silverberg's plodding but mostly well-aimed analyses demonstrate, these stories are nigh-perfect examples of the craft, with, at worst, microscopic flaws. However, apprentice writers who lack the young Silverberg's boundless self-confidence might well be daunted rather than inspired by such perfection."

Wrong, wrong, wrong.

I don't mind having my essays called "plodding." I don't think they are, not at all, but it's the reviewer's privilege to call them that. It's the rest of the passage that's cockeyed, the stuff about the stories being so good that they would intimidate any young writer less dauntless than I.

For one thing, the book makes it clear that I laid no claim to dauntlessness when I was learning my trade. My autobiographical essay, on the contrary, is so thorough a study in humility that one reviewer called the

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piece "fascinating in its masochistic honesty." Again and again I spoke of reading the science-fiction magazines of the early 1950s, when I was in my late teens, and coming away from them awed and shaken and frightened by the immense gulf between my pitiful skills and those of the godlike writers whose stories they contained. "They, so it seemed to me, were of the elect," I wrote. "They were the ones who had been admitted to the sanctuary, while I stood on the outside glumly peering in. . . . I gave up the fantasy of becoming a professional writer. I guess I was fourteen or fifteen when I decided that it was a hopeless dream. All my stories were being rejected by the editors and now I had managed to convince myself that successful writers were born, not made. Either you had the right stuff or you didn't, and plainly, I didn't."

This is dauntlessness? This is boundless self-confidence?

As my essay should have made clear even to Kirkus, I managed to overcome the dismay that reading Bester and Kuttner and Sheckley and Dick inspired in me, and plugged away at learning how to write, and finally succeeded in selling a few feeble stories, and then in doing some that were better, and so on until I had actually achieved my goal of becoming a good science-fiction writer. But I didn't get there by studying junk. I did it by reading the best SF I could find — stuff that made the stories I had written seem hopelessly awful — and striving to match it, somehow, with work of my own.

If I had been writing a book for aspiring young architects, what would Kirkus have had me do — show them the Parthenon, or grubby tract housing? Should I have tender young composers study Bach, or Bon Jovi? Send apprentice filmmakers off to see *Citizen Kane*, or *Teen Werewolf*?

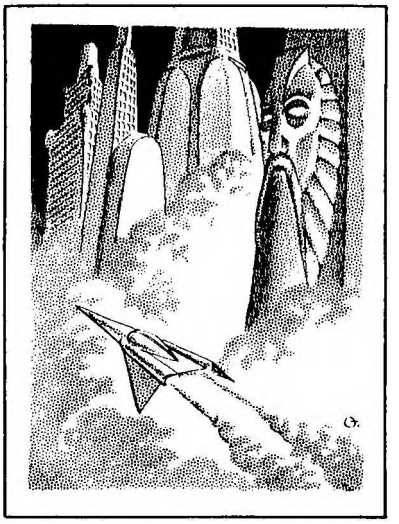
There's enough mediocrity already, within the SF field and outside it. I don't mean to encourage the creation of more. If the delicate novice writers for whom the Kirkus Service shows such consideration are intimidated by the stories in *Robert Silverberg's Worlds of Wonder* to the point where they give up all attempts at becoming writers, that's just fine. They wouldn't have made the grade anyway. By quitting at the outset, they save themselves and a lot of editors the trouble of having to deal with their pallid, clumsy, unpublishable manuscripts.

I venture to say that *every* writer has felt intimidated, not just at the outset of his career but all through it, by the great masterpieces that precede him. I don't just mean Asimov, Bradbury, Heinlein, and — yes — Silverberg. I mean Mailer, Updike, Styron, and Roth. I mean Tolstoy, Joyce, Faulkner, and Kafka. Every one of them was an apprentice once. Every one of them — and there are some powerful egos in that list — surely shivered with awe as he tiptoed past the mighty works of his predecessors. Every one of them felt uncertainty bordering on outright shame as he timidly offered his first manuscript for some editor's appraisal.

And yet, and yet, and yet — they all overcame that fear eventually. Perhaps it continued to rise up in them with each new manuscript, even after they were established, even after they were famous. No matter. They went on working. They had no choice. The real writer never does. The works of the titans go on looming above us — and we do our best, nevertheless.

So, Kirkus Service, I invited the would-be science-fiction writers who are the primary intended audience of my book to read Moore's "No Woman

Born" and Blish's "Common Time" and Bester's "Fondly Fahrenheit," and to reflect long and deep on why those stories are masterpieces. I don't think I dared anyone to go out and equal them with his apprentice work. I put them out there as lofty examples of the finest — inimitable, unapproachable, an inspiration to us all. If those stories are daunting, so be it. I shed no tears for the terminally dauntable, and I feel no guilt for having daunted them. We have our full quota of mediocre writers already. What we need are the people who will someday equal the masterpieces in *Worlds of Wonder*. Someday — not necessarily tomorrow morning. It's a stiff assignment, I know. But those who can't transcend the humility they feel when contemplating the classics of their field are never going to write anything worthwhile themselves anyway, and they and we are all better off if they channel their energies in other directions.



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IF I FELL, WOULD I FALL?

by Kevin J. Anderson and Doug Beason
art: Robert J. Pasternak

Kevin J. Anderson has had over 130 short stories, articles, and reviews published in various magazines and anthologies, including The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction, The Year's Best Fantasy Stories: 13, New Destinies 3, DRAGON® Magazine, *and* Borderland. *NAL/Signet Books will publish his first novel,* Resurrection, Inc. *He currently works as a technical writer for a large research laboratory.*

This is Doug Beason's second appearance in Amazing® Stories; *his first was "The Man I'll Never Be" (May 1987), which he has expanded into a novel for Pocket Books. He has also sold stories to* There Will Be War *and* New Destinies 1. *Doug holds a Ph.D. in physics, and he heads up a plasma physics research group in Albuquerque, New Mexico.*

Encased in the vast organic solar-sail creature, Ramis watched his journey through the monitor, studying his course. He plunged toward the desperate L-5 colony, hanging alone in space.

"You were always there to catch me when I fell, Sarat," the boy muttered to the sail-creature, though it could not hear him. "Are you ready to catch me now?"

Ramis shifted his position in the cramped cyst cavity that kept him alive as the sail-creature rode the solar wind. He took great care not to bump or damage the seven sail-creature embryos at his feet.

For a brief moment, the boy snapped open the faceplate of his space suit and filled his lungs with humid air. Hard cosmic rays still penetrated even Sarat's tough exoskeleton, but the fresh oxygen in the cavity drove back the claustrophobic dankness for a while.

He groped around the spongy cyst until he found the joystick controls for the external video monitor. Swiveling the camera, he focused on the bright L-5 colony waxing closer and closer. A week ago the starving colony had been only a moderately bright point of light, barely distinguishable from the soup of stars. Now, the colony glowed as a slowly rotating cylinder. Time was growing short for the L-5 colonists, for him.

"Calling Orbitech One!" Ramis spoke into the transmitter, then realized he had slipped into his customary Tagalog, like all the Filipinos on the

Aguinaldo, his home colony. He squinted at a sheet in front of him, sending the same message in faltering English. "Calling Orbitech One! Calling L-5 colony!" Still no answer. Ramis muttered under his breath, with no one else to talk to. "How am I supposed to rescue you if you won't answer?" He had been talking to himself too much in the past few days. Ramis snapped the helmet shut.

He squinted at the cross hairs barely visible on the video screen. The camera angle had been offset enough to account for the Orbitech colony's motion; by centering the image in the cross hairs, the sail-creature would tack ahead to intercept the colony in its orbit. He saw that Sarat had drifted off course by only a fraction of a degree, but with thousands of kilometers left to travel, he would still miss Orbitech One with room to spare.

Ramis carefully removed a small knife from its package, then looked at the cross hairs on the monitor to judge the angle from inside the sail-creature's cyst. Selecting the proper spot, he jabbed Sarat's sensitive internal membrane with the knife's point.

He felt a tension, a ripple, as the vast creature's reflexes turned it away from the sharp prick. "Sorry, Sarat." The lumbering movement seemed to take years, but the silent L-5 colony finally drifted into the center of the cross hairs again.

Once more, Ramis tried counting stars, then making up rhymes, anything to make him forget about the boredom for a while, or to forget about his slim chances for ever returning to the *Aguinaldo* colony. . . .

Four months before, Ramis had come by accident upon the *Aguinaldo*'s leader, Yoli Magsaysay. He remembered seeing the leader as Magsaysay stared out a greenhouse window, squinting at the image of Earth. From the *Aguinaldo*'s position at L-4, the home planet shone blue and beautiful, apparently unscarred from its last war, though such devastation would take years to heal. In the harsh greenhouse shadows, Magsaysay looked thin, with mottled brown skin and flecks of gray and white peppering his bushy hair; he moved painfully on joints calcified from years in low gravity.

Unaware of Ramis, Magsaysay muttered to himself, as if in deep thought. "We've always been able to find plenty of reasons for war, no matter how many problems we eliminate —"

Ramis startled the leader. "But they can't just leave us here to starve! How are we supposed to survive without the supply ships?"

Magsaysay looked down at him for a moment, as if studying him, trying to find a simple answer. Ramis felt suddenly self-conscious of his less-than-average height for a 16-year-old. Magsaysay turned from the boy and looked out the viewport. "They have no choice. The war did not destroy them, but it caused enough damage that they can't possibly send any ships to us."

"But the other colonies! We all depend on those ships —"

Magsaysay continued gently, "Spaceflight is a nicety — it requires indus-

try, technological sophistication, cooperation and communication on a grand scale. The war broke apart all the links in that chain. It will be ten years or so before they can rebuild . . . they must learn to conquer their own problems before they can come back for us. By then it will be too late.

"A terrorist builds a crude nuclear device and accidentally sets off a great deal more than she has intended. A superpower retaliates against the wrong enemy, who in turn retaliates as well. It was like a barroom brawl on a global scale, and the world managed to cripple itself before the leaders could bring themselves under control again.

"We people on the Lagrange colonies are just more casualties in another war. We are insignificant compared to their other losses. Our numbers have already been written in their books. We are on our own."

Ramis suddenly had a frightening, claustrophobic realization of just how *isolated* they all were on the Lagrange colonies, in islands of gravitational stability between Earth and the Moon; they had no ships to get back to Earth, or even to each other. The last shuttle transport had been hijacked by a gang of desperate people from Orbitech One, and had crash-landed near Clavius Base on the Moon. The Orbitech colony's few feeble attempts at self-sustenance — its symbolic but tiny hydroponic banks of wheat and corn and rice — would not be enough to last its inhabitants for very long.

But on the *Aguinaldo,* the unorthodox Filipino bioengineers had kept the people alive, just barely, because of the experimental wall-kelp and the sail-creatures they had developed years before.

Ramis remembered hearing old Luis Sandovaal, the exiled bioengineer who had first created the wall-kelp, arguing with some of the colony's agricultural specialists in a public debate.

"In order to produce a viable food source in space, we can't just attempt to grow the same old crops! Listen to you: rice and wheat, rice and wheat! Are you idiots? Do you have tumors for brains? Those grains have adapted to Earth's planetary environment over millennia. Here on the Lagrange colonies, plants will grow in a completely different ecosystem, an environment far removed from Earth's.

"Do you begin to see? Have you opened your eyes? We're away from Earth now, and it requires a radically new look at how plants and animals are put together."

After Sandovaal had stirred their anger, he had then smugly presented his first samplings of wall-kelp. Then, leaving the agricultural specialists to dicker over the best way to implement kelp production, Sandovaal went back to his assistants and began work on a far more complex series of cellular grafts, which eventually resulted in the sail-creatures. . . .

The wall-kelp tasted bland, but Ramis and all the others had been eating nothing else for almost four months now, ever since the supplies from the last Earth ship had dwindled away. Cut off and isolated at L-4, the *Aguinaldo* had listened to the radio transmissions from Orbitech One. The

pitiful pleas for help growing gradually more desperate: the grim news of starvation, fights, even hints of cannibalism, depending on how the messages were interpreted. The Filipino colonists could do nothing but listen — they had no ship to send, no help to offer.

Until now.

Inside Sarat, looking at the Orbitech colony on the video screen, Ramis felt as though he were falling, falling down toward the station. Space gave him no frame of reference, no horizon, no gravity. The direction *down* was where things fell . . . but out in space, everywhere was *down.*

As the Orbitech colony loomed closer, Ramis groped out to touch the wall of the cyst, searching for stability, trying to fight off the sickening feeling of vertigo that made him feel as if he would be falling forever because there was no place to land.

But Sarat had always saved him from falling, even years before. . . .

Eleven years old.

Being at Jump-off was like standing at the bottom of a gargantuan well. The long axis of the cylindrical *Aguinaldo* stretched above him as young Ramis floated with his mother at one end of the zero-gee core; he squinted toward the other end, ten kilometers away. Clusters of children played in the core, punctuated by sail-creatures darting in and out. At other times, athletes joined each other at the core for a bout of zero-gravity sports.

Living areas curled up around the cylinder's side, snaking across the fields, the rice paddies, the stadiums and ponds. Wall-kelp covered the remainder of the wall, allowing none of the colony's metallic structure to show. Revolving around the long axis, his whole world seemed as if it might collapse and fall to the center. The sight always made Ramis feel dizzy. But the colony had no real gravity, only centrifugal force, and once he lost contact with the hull, he would be floating free.

Ramis was much smaller than others his age, and he fiercely attempted to shatter the perception. He tried to keep aloof from his mother, avoiding her to make himself seem more independent. But at Jump-off he was thankful for her presence, with the exciting but frightening vertigo waiting for him above.

Ramis tied several small sandbags around his waist, some more massive than others, that would allow him to maneuver in the weightless environment. He turned a quick glance to his mother; she nodded encouragement, and then Ramis sprang straight up.

His momentum rapidly bore him high into the cylindrical core. Below, his mother diminished as he drifted out along the axis. Other children were already playing, though it was early in the subjective day. As Ramis floated up, one of the wandering sail-creature nymphs nudged several discarded sandbags his way. He tried to reach out and catch them, but he drifted past too quickly. It never hurt to have an extra bag or two, though every bit of

additional mass decreased his ability to maneuver effectively. Everyone on the *Aguinaldo* quickly learned about conservation of momentum, knowing that you got nowhere at all by flailing arms and legs in the air.

As he began to drift away from the larger congregation of children, Ramis removed the smallest of the sandbags. He twisted himself around and hurled the sandbag away, slowing his motion. Throwing another sandbag insured that he drifted back to the cluster of children; they showed no sign of noticing him, but he knew he was implicitly included in their game.

Half a dozen young sail-creatures moved around in the vast core, looking like brownish green balloons with finlike "wings" protruding from their sides. The creatures swam through the air with an eerie and seemingly effortless grace, their flowing wing strokes calling to mind Earth's giant manta rays. The younger creatures frolicked about, some playing with the children and being treated as pets, but most of them tended to their primary purpose of nudging the stray sandbags back toward the center of the core. If a sandbag drifted too close to the rotating rim and struck one of the colonists below, its tangential velocity could be deadly.

Ramis played floater-tag with some of the other children, using the game to keep himself distracted from the zero-gravity disorientation he had never outgrown. After a breathless chase, Ramis finally managed to escape being caught by hurling his last, most massive sandbag and flying laterally faster than the pursuing girl could catch up. Ramis grinned as the girl drifted past him, helpless and unable to change her course.

He let himself fly unguided, feeling the breeze rippling in his hair as he traveled across the core. Here, his small size didn't hinder him — he was the equal of any of the other children.

The young sail-creatures hovered about, rounding up the extra sandbags. Ramis realized that he had nothing else to throw and almost casually looked around to see if he could catch a sandbag as he drifted by, but the air around him had been recently swept by the sail-creatures, leaving it clear and barren. He had seen some of his friends stranded in the weightless core before, and they usually ended up being the laughingstock of the other children. The winds here close to the rim would move him somewhat, and eventually he would come close to a sandbag. But for now he continued to drift.

Ramis looked around him, saw the central cluster of other children playing, and then he looked down.

His heart froze. The rotating wall of the *Aguinaldo* seemed to pull at him as it rushed past; though only meters away, he still approached much too close to the rim. He had drifted too far. The winds buffeted him, but he could not slow down.

Then he saw one of the colony buildings rotating toward him. The building contained some of the electronics-maintenance equipment, and it looked almost squat, broad-based, and only two levels high despite the low gravity — but Ramis still drifted slowly toward the rim, unable to get out of the way

as the wide wall came at him like a giant fly swatter moving at 140 kilometers per hour.

Ramis began to shout, waving his hands wildly. He knew it would do nothing to change his motion. He desperately prayed that one of the other boys might be able to do something, if Ramis could attract his attention. But he had hardly any time. If only he had worn his shoes, he could have hurled them away and made himself drift to one side, perhaps enough to let the building slash by without crushing him, but he had nothing: bare feet, loose shorts, light shirt.

The sharp corners of the building's wall charged onward. Ramis seemed to be falling toward it. He could feel the recycled air burning in his lungs. His heart pounded. He felt giddy . . . helpless. The other children had noticed now. Some pointed at him wildly, some began to move. But it was too late —

Suddenly, something firm rammed him from below. He let out a gasp, and then he was struck again, moving away. Ramis whirled in the air, twisting his body, to see one of the sail-creatures with a dark Z-shaped mark on its back. The creature held its own body rigid even as the broad expanse of the building's roof swooped by beneath them. Through one of the skylights, Ramis caught a brief glimpse of several techs working beside a table. They didn't even notice him hanging there.

The young sail-creature butted him a last time and knocked him toward the center of the core.

Still terrified and shuddering, Ramis hung, slowly drifting, as some of the excited children moved toward him. Only when he had a sandbag in his hand did he fully relax. Twisting his body, he looked and saw the young sail-creature circling in the air as if pleased with itself; it nonchalantly went out to retrieve a few more sandbags. Ramis watched for a moment, and as the sail-creature spun in the air, the Z-marking became visible again.

"Salamet po, Sarat," Ramis whispered in Tagalog: *Thank you, timely one.*

Just a week before his departure on the Orbitech rescue mission, Ramis had stood alone in the green darkness of one of the alcoves where wall-kelp took in the hard, unfiltered sunlight from the outside. He smelled the heavy humidity in the air and the flat odor of the kelp. Between the sheets of wall-kelp and the actual window, he heard the bubble of reservoirs that recirculated contaminated water for the kelp's absorption and retention; fecal material and other solid wastes were channeled into separate bins the wall-kelp could directly tap.

Green strands dangled down, blocking the outside view. Ramis pulled aside some of the damp, pliant strands and stared out at the stars. The blackness and the bright lights extended infinitely in all directions. He looked into the plane of the galaxy, watching the wide swath of the Milky Way as it rotated past with the *Aguinaldo*'s motion.

At the far end of the colony, tethered to the *Aguinaldo* as if with an umbilical cord, floated the huge growing sail of Sarat. Ramis could still barely make out the dark, blotchy Z on the central portion of the mature sail-creature's body.

In the nearly five years since Sarat had saved Ramis' life, the boy had sought the sail-creature out, played with him, formed a bond with him. Sarat could have lived for years inside the zero-gravity core of the *Aguinaldo*. But in the lean times with little food, people had even begun to eat the sail-creatures, and now the bioengineers had forced this final metamorphosis on Sarat in an attempt to save the Orbitech colony.

Yoli Magsaysay startled him by placing a paternal hand on his shoulder. "We are very grateful you're willing to take this risk for us, Ramis." The boy had not heard the leader of the *Aguinaldo* come into the greenhouse alcove. Magsaysay addressed him as an equal now, rather than just a small inquisitive teenager who had too much interest in Earth politics.

"The Orbitech colonists will owe you their lives. We have great faith in you, Ramis." Magsaysay smiled.

I *will be a hero,* Ramis thought, I *will be greatly appreciated.* I *am saving the colonists.* He turned and looked out the window again. *What about Sarat? Sarat is the one who's dying. Sarat is the martyr. What about him?*

But the words that came out were different. "Thank you, *Bi'Kahn,* but I'd like to be alone right now. Please."

Magsaysay nodded, then softly padded out of the greenhouse alcove on his calloused bare feet.

You had no choice in any of this, Sarat. Would you have made the same decision on your own? Ramis thought.

Because he would pilot the sail-creature to the Orbitech colony, Ramis had been "encouraged" to attend all the problem-solving meetings held by Magsaysay and the upper-level bioengineers. The six of them sat in one of the empty, impeccably clean meeting halls; Ramis held himself completely still, listening but sadly apathetic. Luis Sandovaal also attended the meetings, but the elderly bioengineer had little patience for all the talking, and rarely held his temper more than ten minutes.

Sandovaal's white hair looked thick, but ragged, as if he cut it with a dull knife; dark and smooth skin seemed oddly contrasted with the bright blue eyes he had somehow retained from the Danish half of his heritage. "It will *work,* blast and rot you!" The bioengineer glared at each of them. "It has worked twice before when it didn't matter, and now we can put the sails to some useful purpose."

"You didn't even intend the first transformation to work, Sandovaal," Dobo, his assistant, commented sourly. Dobo would have replaced Sandovaal as the chief bioengineer years before, but the older man had persistently refused to step down.

The sail-creatures were mules themselves, unable to reproduce, and the

bioengineers continued to clone them from the cells of the first shepherd-animal developed by Sandovaal, which he had named A-04. After five years, when dozens of the innocuous creatures flitted about the core of the *Aguinaldo,* A-04 had apparently died; the children found it floating motionless and inert, lifeless. Dobo and Sandovaal had argued over the cause of the creature's death, whether it had simply reached the end of its natural life cycle or if Sandovaal had made some failure on the genetic level, some congenital mistake that caused A-04's premature death.

In a typical fit of temper, Sandovaal refused to allow Dobo to do an autopsy on the creature; instead, he jettisoned the seemingly dead organism out one of the airlock chutes.

Suddenly exposed to the incredible decompression and the harsh, deadly environment of space, the creature exhibited a peculiar survival mechanism. Cut off from all other sources of nourishment, the sail-creature increased its surface area a million fold, manifesting its recessive plant characteristics and spreading out in a hopeless effort to capture solar radiation for sufficient photosynthesis. The creature spread out thinner and thinner until it became a huge blanket only a few cells thick that surrounded the main body core, which was encased by a hardened membrane.

Untethered, the enormous creature began to drift away, pushed along by solar photons, which it captured and tried to convert to chemical energy. It slipped away from the Lagrange point and, after passing the boundary of the gravity well, promptly went off into its own orbit. The people on the *Aguinaldo* tracked it with their telescopes, amazed, for a long time.

"We need a controlled experiment!" Sandovaal demanded, and he and Dobo promptly made arrangements to jettison another of the creatures, this time tethered to the colony and burdened with dozens of implanted instruments. The second creature, too, transformed into an organic sail, and it lived for seventeen days out in the cold vacuum.

The bioengineers concluded that the creature could not receive enough energy through photosynthesis to survive in space; the extreme transformation only postponed death while the creature exhausted its inner energy reserves. In space suits, several workers cut up the wispy-thin sail and brought samples inside for further analysis, letting the rest of the hulk drift off on its own.

Dobo's suggestion, spoken in his particularly grating voice, brought Ramis' attention back to the meeting. "An irritating chemical, perhaps a hormone, implanted in the right spot *before* the creature's transformation will leave a chamber, a cyst, in which the boy can ride." Dobo jabbed a finger at Ramis, but turned back to the others. "Our test sail did respond to stimuli — he should be able to steer."

Sandovaal snorted to himself and stood up as if to leave. "They don't want to help, Dobo. Leave them alone, if all they want to do is talk about it."

"And how is Ramis to get back?" Magsaysay asked, a voice of calmness at

the table.

The old bioengineer waved his hand as if the question were irrelevant. "Let him take some embryos with him. In six months or so, they'll be full enough grown that he can ride one back. Or can't you bear to be away from your family for so long, boy?"

Ramis simmered at the man's callousness, but Magsaysay interrupted before he could say anything. "Stop calling him *boy,* Luis. Anyone willing to take the risk deserves your respect."

"He *has* my respect — it's *you* who's dragging your feet, not him, and not me. Why not just let everyone at Orbitech starve while you continue to 'discuss' the problem?"

Magsaysay tapped his long fingernails together, moodily contemplating. Up above, through the skylight of the nearly deserted meeting hall, Ramis could see the shadows of young sail-creatures as they flitted overhead. Ramis felt his anger continue to grow, not because of Sandovaal's remarks, and not because of Magsaysay's actions. Neither of the men seemed to be considering what they were actually suggesting: that they cast Sarat into cold and deadly space, where he would contort himself, stretch his entire body taut in a gasping effort to absorb every passing photon and try, *try,* to snatch enough energy from it, until at last even that no longer helped. . . .

Ramis hung his head and refused to meet their eyes, hoping to disguise the angry flush on his cheeks. He no longer wanted to listen to the meeting.

The bioengineers had performed the procedure with Sarat's proto-sails oriented edge-on to the sun, to keep the creature from catching the solar wind before the process was complete. Hour by hour the sails grew as Sarat's fins spread out in the vacuum, becoming vast cell-thin sails, immense and opaque, scores of kilometers to a side. Sarat's main bodily core became rigid and exceedingly tough, an organic "hull."

"We can't implant you too soon because the creature is still forming a rigid sheath to keep the new sails in place," Dobo had told Ramis, almost offhandedly. "The timing is going to be close — after we encyst you, you'll have only about two weeks to reach the Orbitech colony. If the sail dies before you get there, you won't be able to steer. And then you'll be stuck."

And what of Sarat? Ramis thought. A dead and drifting sail battered about by the solar winds, sketching its own orbit. . . .

When the time came, Ramis participated with self-contained indignation. He suited up, and the bioengineers went with him outside the airlock.

After they had sealed Ramis inside the dark womblike cavity in Sarat's body, he unpackaged the wall-kelp modules and set them against the membrane wall. The kelp would begin to grow rapidly, tapping directly into Sarat's metabolic processes, and filling the cavity with oxygen. Ramis also knew the kelp would further drain Sarat's energy reserves . . . shortening the sail creature's life span.

While he waited, the other suited figures hooked up the video camera on the outside of the cyst, letting Ramis see his destination. Testing, Ramis swiveled the camera around, panning the five-kilometer length of the *Aguinaldo*'s cylinder; he wondered if homesickness already had a place in his confused feelings inside.

Through the camera, a suited figure moved his arm rapidly up and down, signaling that everything looked good. When the bioengineers released the tether, Ramis did not even notice the slight acceleration. Inside Sarat, he waited, imagining motion, imagining that he was falling again, as the photons struck the creature's vast sail surface and increased its momentum, little by little, pushing Sarat at an ever-accelerating snail's pace toward the Orbitech colony.

Ramis wondered how many days had passed.

Filling up most of the screen now, the image of the Orbitech colony continued to rotate, a vast cylinder spinning on its central axis, ringed by an external torus for the zero-gravity manufacturing.

He felt cramped, hot. The air in the cyst was stifling. A constant ache echoed from his joints, his elbows and knees. He felt dizzy most of the time, somewhat sick to his stomach; the suit had not protected him completely from the hard radiation in space. He would be a long time recovering from this journey . . . if he survived at all.

Sarat hardly responded to the boy's course-adjusting maneuvers anymore. Ramis had to resort reluctantly to deep, vicious jabs with the knife to get the sail-creature to turn even a little. Ramis reached out and stroked the creature's inner membrane through the thick jungle of wall-kelp growing unchecked inside the cavity. He didn't even know if Sarat could feel him.

Ramis conserved the batteries in his small transceiver, using it only occasionally as he neared the Orbitech colony. The transceiver had a limited range; he could not even communicate with the *Aguinaldo.* Yoli Magsaysay had promised to continue transmitting to the L-5 colony, telling the inhabitants about the lifesaving supplies Ramis brought. But the boy had no way of knowing if those messages had been acknowledged, or even received.

Was anybody still alive on the Orbitech colony? The metallic surface of the cylinder glinted in the sunlight, causing bright flares and smears on the video screen. The L-5 colony's observation windows glimmered with light from the inside, naked of any wall-kelp. The colony looked strange to Ramis, but he could not focus the video camera enough to see inside.

What if he found no one at all? How would he ever get back? He could never get inside the cylinder unless the other colonists opened up and took him in. And Sarat was almost dead.

"Orbitech One, I am almost to you," he said in halting English. A loud meaningless crackle returned, but Ramis kept trying. They *had* to know he was coming. Even without transmissions from the *Aguinaldo,* no one could

fail to notice a vast organic solar sail drifting closer every day.

He kept trying until a weak voice came from the receiver. ". . . here . . . ready . . . receive you."

The Orbitech colony loomed up on the video screen, rapidly closing. *Am I ready?* Ramis thought. His stomach wrenched as memories of Sarat haunted him . . . Sarat. In order to slow them down enough for Ramis to survive the impact with the colony, he would have to collapse Sarat's sails, draw them in to cushion him from the crash. Sarat had no reflexes, no choice in the matter.

Moving slowly, like someone preparing to give a eulogy, Ramis withdrew the pressurized vial with the tiny explosive-driven carrier pellets. He had to judge when the time was right. He had to *know*, and he could not hesitate. He had to rid himself of sentimentality now because he would have no time for it when the moment came. And if he botched this up, then he would have sacrificed Sarat for nothing, making a martyr of himself as well.

The end of the Orbitech cylinder loomed in front of him, moving visibly closer, minute by minute. He saw the details of the airlock now, the corporate logo, the viewing windows on either side of it. The colony filled the entire video screen.

Ramis felt the sweat of his fingers inside the gloves, holding the vial of pressurized trigger-hormone, slick against the mylar surface. He remembered Sarat.

Falling toward the curved, kelp-covered inner surface of the *Aguinaldo*; hanging stranded as the wide wall rushed toward him . . . he felt the fear burn in his lungs. But Sarat was there, stopping him, pushing him to safety, saving him —

Bumping him away from the deadly building that came hurtling toward him with the *Aguinaldo*'s rotation —

Finding the one sail-creature with the Z-mark on its back, the one creature that had been more special than any other; playing with Sarat as they both grew older —

You were always willing to catch me when I fell, Sarat. Are you ready to catch me now?

Ramis rammed the hypodermic cartridge inside the sail-creature's membrane and ejected the vial's contents.

With incredible slowness, the sails collapsed. They drew in toward Sarat's body as a butterfly might bring in its wings. The molecular-thin sails stretched dozens of kilometers out in front of the cyst; wispy fragments tore away, ripped by the sudden movement.

With the tattered ends of its sails, Sarat's crumpled body struck the Orbitech colony. Buffeted about, Ramis felt the impact ripple through the creature's hardened flesh, but the boy was padded by curtains of wall-kelp. The minute-long collision seemed to take hours.

He felt himself drifting back again, rebounding. Suddenly, panic started

to trickle through him. If he drifted out of the Orbitech colony's grasp, then he would be stranded again, without even the sails for maneuvering. The journey could not have been wasted; Sarat could not have died for nothing.

The video screen showed nothing, covered up by the folds of the collapsed sails. Ramis checked the seal of his helmet, made certain that the sail-creature embryos were protected in their airtight canisters, then he took out his knife.

He had to get out; he had to do something before it was too late. Ramis shouted again into the transmitter — nothing.

He hesitated only a moment out of respect for Sarat, and then he plunged the knife into the sail-creature, trying to cut his way out of the cyst.

When the blade broke through to the outside, decompression almost ripped the knife out of his hand. The out-rushing air tore the gash open wider; Ramis continued to saw with the knife edge. Crystals sparkled in the vacuum as the humidity instantly froze, layering everything with a thin film of ice. One of the wall-kelp bladders burst and froze in the same second.

Ramis could see partly through the opening in the cyst, and then suddenly he felt a tug on the carcass of the sail-creature. As he peered out, he saw several figures in space suits near him, attaching a tether to keep him from drifting farther away with the recoil of the impact.

The boy felt drained with relief, but he could not yet relax. He kept working with the knife, trying to make the opening wide enough for him to emerge. One of the suited figures swam up in front of him, face to face, nodding.

Ramis was startled to see behind the faceplate a thin, emaciated face with sunken eyes and bony temples. But the face bore a look of wonderment that seemed to cut through months of despair.

As the boy emerged from the hulk of the dead sail-creature, he turned back, feeling like a newborn coming out of a womb, and saw the shriveled remains of Sarat. The once-magnificent sails looked as if somebody had crumpled up a gigantic wad of paper and tossed it aside.

He turned to the large observation windows on either side of the airlock. Pressed against them he saw scattered faces with large gaps between them — pitifully few faces. They looked as gaunt and as starved as the one he had seen inside the suit.

One of the men wrestled the knife from him; Ramis was too weary to struggle, so he released it and kicked toward the airlock. Arms reached out to embrace him, and he almost collapsed in their grasp.

And then, though he still felt incredibly weary and dizzy from his journey, he looked back to watch the suited figures cutting at Sarat's crumpled sails, getting at the creature's body core. The severed tissue-thin sails drifted away as the L-5 colony continued on its orbit.

Ramis floated inside the airlock, and after they had cycled him through into the colony's zero-gee core, he cracked open his helmet to take a deep

breath of the warm, stale air of the Orbitech industrial colony. All of the smells were different, filled with a new strangeness to which he'd have to adjust.

As the other suited figures moved through the entry bay, they hauled between them the large dead hulk of Sarat. Ramis blinked his eyes, feeling dizzy and disoriented in the weightless core. Stripped of his once-magnificent sails, Sarat looked like a mass of processed wall-kelp. Ramis felt a moment of shocked indignation, anger, as he realized they were probably recovering the meat for distribution among the colonists. Food. Two men moved past, carrying the wall-kelp nexus. The frozen kelp strands were still edible, and the nexus would survive.

The other people pressing together in the entry bay looked at the sail-creature with eyes brightened by awe and hopeful curiosity. After a hushed moment of silence, they began to inundate Ramis with questions.

"What is it?" "How did you get here?" "What's it for?" "Did you bring food?" They gawked at the hulk of Sarat, at the wall-kelp, then pressed close around Ramis. They looked uncertain, as if unwilling to let genuine hope show on their faces.

The fast-paced English phrases darted around his ears. He felt so tired; the questions seemed so difficult to understand, and even harder to answer. Hadn't they been listening to the transmissions from the *Aguinaldo?* Yoli Magsaysay had said they'd explain everything. . . .

"Food," he muttered, but all of the Orbitech colonists heard him clearly. The bay grew quiet. Ramis gestured weakly toward the sail-creature's body, and then to the wall-kelp nexus. "Now . . . and later."

Sarat would give the colonists a small amount of time, another sacrifice to provide them with sustenance until the fast-growing wall-kelp could begin to produce. A short-term solution . . . and perhaps with the wall-kelp, the Orbitech people could survive; and Ramis could survive among them until he would be able to return to the *Aguinaldo*. The boy looked around in shy uneasiness. He would have to make his home among these starving strangers; he would have to adapt to their culture, learn their language.

A blond-haired man opened his suit helmet and looked at the sealed transparent containers of sail-creature embryos, puzzled.

Ramis went up to him and gently, almost reverently, took the embryos. He searched for the English words, "I must . . . please keep." He stared at the embryos for a long moment. They were his way home . . . or a food source . . . or Sarat's brothers.

"I must talk to all." He tried to keep his voice firm, and spread his arms to indicate everything he had brought with him. "I must explain . . . all this."

The other Orbitech colonists gathered around him. He would be walking a tightrope, balancing everything he knew against the grim situation on the Orbitech colony. But as he moved deeper into the L-5 colony, the other

people supported him.

Ramis wondered if he would ever really be afraid of falling again. ✪

THE ICE MINERS

In the rush and pull
of asynchronous orbits
in helmeted-faceplate suspension
we tap the well of space
and are gone
with the swimming light

we fall sunward
yet even with the great
lasered disks of ice in tow
our shifting umbra
is but a speck
on the gutted shell of Callisto

our near weightless journey
is as tedious as
the silence we traverse

yet everywhere our caravans have passed
from the bumpy free-floating
geodesic of New Chicago
to the boomtowns of Mars
we have become the stuff of legend

water-bearers
nomads and life-carriers
through the desert of the stellar night

— Bruce Boston

AN INFINITY OF KAREN
by Lawrence Watt-Evans
art: Nicola Cuti

The author's short stories have appeared in Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine *and* Dragon® Magazine. *He is currently working on the third book of the "Legends of Ethshar" series for Del Rey Books; the first two books,* The Misenchanted Sword *and* With a Single Spell, *in that series have sold over 100,000 copies. The author has also published the very popular "Lords of Dûs" series for Del Rey Books.*

The approving officer had told him that his request was unusual, the first of its kind. He didn't know whether that had encouraged or delayed its eventual approval.

He remembered that clearly as the policemen led him to the waiting car. Had anyone here ever made such a request? Would they believe his story?

He had the entry tag the guards had given him, and he had done no real harm; at worst, they would simply throw him back into the Hole. As long as he didn't lose his bearings, he'd be no worse off than before.

After all, if they let him go, he would simply go back to the Hole on his own. He had seen all he had to see here, and again, he had not found what he wanted. If he had been strong, if he had followed his own rules, he would have already been gone, but he had been weak. The sight of her, alone, had broken down his resolve, and instead of the quick check he had intended, and had already made fourteen times in nightmarish repetition, he had followed her home and watched.

He remembered crouching in the all-too-familiar bushes, peering in through those familiar windows, as he watched her put away the groceries, heard, faint through the glass, her shouted conversation with her husband. He remembered how he had hated that husband, hated himself, and toyed with thoughts of killing him and taking his place.

He could not do that, though — at least, not yet. If the disappointments continued, world after world, he was not sure he would be able to resist that evil temptation. He told himself that his doubles had as much right to live — and to her — as he did himself, that it would still be cold-blooded murder whatever the circumstances, and that, worst of all, the deception couldn't work; he had lost five months out of their life together, months he could never recover, months she would remember and discuss that he knew nothing about. He would be out of place, out of time, with his business and their friends — and all that was in addition to whatever other divergences there might be between this reality and his native world, divergences not related to her death.

He climbed into the police car, grateful that the officers had not bothered to handcuff him. He thought they believed what he had told them of his story; certainly his face provided good evidence. Karen's reaction when they had brought him to the door had been proof enough of that. He had seen not the slightest doubt or hesitation on her face as she blurted, "Not him! That's my husband!"

Then her husband, her *real* husband, her husband of *this* world, had come up behind her, and her annoyance with the blundering police had dissolved into shock. She had stared first at one, then the other, and been able to distinguish them only by their clothes and by the prowler's unkempt hair.

The officer had seen the resemblance, of course, and had demanded, "Lady, are you sure which one's your husband?"

Karen had hesitated, a ghastly uncertainty in her eyes, and he had fought

down that treacherous urge to lie, to try to win her by deceit. He could not bear that hurt confusion. "He's her husband," he had said. "I'm from cross-time. I came through the Hole, and I wanted to see my double." That was not exactly true — in fact, he had hoped above all else that he had no living double in this world. He had come to see Karen.

But that would be too hard to explain, there on the little porch with Karen staring at him, so he had lied and let the police lead him away.

He said nothing during the ride. When they reached the little station on Corrigan Street, he sat silently while one of the pair got out, came around, and opened the car door. Obediently, he slid out and stood up, then froze.

The old red Chevy was pulling in behind them, Karen in the passenger seat and his double driving.

"What are they doing here?" he demanded.

"They're the complainants," a policeman replied. "They have to decide whether to press charges."

"Oh, God," he said. He fought back tears at the thought of Karen — not *his* Karen but still Karen — swearing out a complaint against him.

The doubles sat in the car, waiting for him to be led inside before they emerged, and he knew she couldn't hear him, but he shouted, "I'm sorry, Karen!"

The officers led him up the stone steps.

Inside he told the whole story, with Karen sitting and staring at him. He tried not to look at her as he described the accident, when the drunken idiot had lost control and sent his Mercedes smashing into the side of the old red Chevy, crushing her body, driving shards of glass into her face, but he glanced over involuntarily and saw her expression of horror, so like the one that had been frozen on his own Karen's face when they took him to identify the body. The undertaker had straightened her features and covered the wounds with make-up, but the result had not been Karen anymore, but a mannequin.

He didn't have to explain the Hole, of course, since it had appeared in their world as well, but he did explain the special commission that decided who was allowed in and out, and how they had approved his request on humanitarian grounds. In this reality such a commission had never been appointed, and anyone who chose to could enter the Hole after listening to a few hours' instruction on the theory of parallel worlds, what was known of the Hole's history, the odds against ever returning to exactly the world one left, and what the greatest dangers were believed to be.

Incoming people were searched, questioned briefly, then allowed to roam freely. When they released him, as he had done fourteen times before, he had headed directly for his own house and looked it over.

The garage was empty, and no one answered the bell. He had taken out his key, but hesitated; even if it worked, if the parallelism extended that far, he would be guilty of breaking and entering if he used it.

And then, as he stood on the little porch, it didn't matter anymore because he saw himself come driving up in an unfamiliar blue sedan. There could be no doubt of the driver's identity.

He had turned away. He was not here to steal his double's wife. Somewhere, in one of the infinite worlds the Hole touched, was a world where Karen had lived and he had died; he was certain of it, believed in it with the same faith a Christian had in God. He was determined to find that world, a world where a Karen waited, as bereft as himself.

He had walked quickly away, before his double could be sure he'd seen anyone at the door, bound for the Hole and a sixteenth attempt. But then, two blocks away, the red Chevy had appeared with Karen driving in her slow, timid fashion, and he had stopped, mesmerized by the sight of her there, alone, returning home. She had been so very much like his own wife, with no husband there to spoil the illusion, and he had turned and followed, watched as she parked the Chevy in front of the garage, as she hauled the groceries from the back, as she stepped up on the stoop and fumbled with her keys, trying to open the back door.

He had slipped into the bushes — just to watch, he told himself, to see a little of her, of the life that that drunk had stolen from him. Just for a moment.

But the moment had stretched on and on, as he was unable to tear his eyes away, and he had grown careless, thought himself unreal, invisible. How could he be lurking in the shrubbery, when he was inside with Karen?

And they had seen him, and his double had called the police without his realizing it, and now he was explaining it all to them, and to the sergeant and two officers.

When he had finished, there was a moment of silence, and he looked up at Karen.

She was crying, and he could not hold back his own tears anymore, but she turned to her own husband and embraced him. He folded her in his arms and comforted her, staring over her back at his double with puzzlement, sorrow, and anger in his eyes.

"Ma'am?" the sergeant asked. "Do you want to press charges? If you don't, we'll take him back to the Hole, as an undesirable. If you do, he'll probably wind up there anyway, but it'll have to go to a judge."

"Let him go," his double said.

"Thank you," he answered.

The husband glanced down at his wife. "Good luck," he said.

"Thank you," the widower repeated. "Sergeant, if you could have someone drive me to the Hole, I'll be glad to leave."

The sergeant nodded.

Half an hour later he stepped through the door of the ramshackle inner barrier around the Hole, the plywood and scrap that had been thrown up in the first panicky confusion after the Appearance. He looked up at the Hole.

Sunlight poured through it from another cosmos somewhere, a world where no one had yet roofed it over. He leaned a few inches to one side and the sunlight vanished.

He had stood beside the Hole fifteen times before, read all the descriptions and theories, and he still didn't really understand how it worked, what he was actually seeing. He did know that the world he saw through the Hole now was not the one he would reach if he stepped through. Whatever that sunlit world was, it was very far away in crosstime, probably totally unlike any world he knew, and that was not what he wanted. He wanted his own world back, but with a single difference: a living, widowed Karen.

He stepped forward into the Hole. As always, he felt no transition, sensed nothing out of the ordinary, save that around him everything he saw shifted slightly, the visible aspect of the Hole expanding into vast confusion before him; but he knew that he had stepped out of that world forever, twisted himself sideways in time.

He turned around and stepped back, out of the Hole, knowing that he could not possibly have arrived in exactly the reality he left; in the Hole the worlds were crowded together in an infinite density, after all. To return, he would need to have stepped back through *exactly* that spot through which he had departed, down to the width of an electron or less.

He had come close, though, so this world should be similar. The barrier around the Hole appeared identical. He knocked on the door.

No one answered. He tried the latch; it worked. He swung it open and stepped out onto a parking lot.

There were no guards, no scientists, no one to interrogate him or search him for weapons; the prefabricated offices and laboratories that had surrounded the Hole in the last world he had visited — and most of the others he had seen — were gone without a trace. The inner barrier stood, untended and neglected, in the parking lot of a Holiday Inn, just as it had when first built.

He glanced around and shrugged. This neglect certainly made things simple. Apparently in this reality, nothing had been done about the Hole's manifestation.

He closed the door behind him and saw that a large sign hung on it, reading EXTREME DANGER! ENTER AT YOUR OWN RISK! He smiled, and walked up the short slope toward the hotel.

He called a cab from the lobby and got a candy bar from the machine while he waited for the cab to arrive. His coins had worked the vending machine correctly, and he hoped that his paper money would be close enough to pass here.

The cab arrived, and he gave his home address as he settled into the rear seat.

He watched the scenery closely during the ride. There were differences — a billboard bore a different advertisement, a house hadn't been painted —

but it was, generally speaking, all familiar. He had not stepped too far away from his own world.

The cab stopped at the curb; he paid the fare, and the cabbie accepted the bills without comment. A moment later he was standing alone on the sidewalk.

The bushes in front of the house had been cut back, far shorter than he had ever trimmed them. An unfamiliar porch swing was crowded in to the left of the front door.

He walked slowly up the path, wondering what significance these changes might have.

The living room drapes were different, as well, and he was suddenly sure that in this reality he did not live in this house; no analog of himself could possibly allow those things in his home. He rang the bell anyway.

An unfamiliar woman answered, about thirty, short and slender, with beautiful red hair and a plain, bland face. "Yes?" she said.

"Ah . . . I was looking for a Karen Criswell? Mrs. Karen Criswell?"

"Oh, that's the lady we bought the house from! Gee, I'm sorry, but she's gone; we've lived here for three months now."

"Gone? Gone where?"

"Well . . ."

"Listen, I really need to find her; it's a family matter. About her brother-in-law." That seemed like his best approach. After all, wasn't he his own brother? If there was a Karen Criswell who had owned this house, then surely it was his wife — her maiden name had been Hoechst.

"I don't know; I don't think I can help you."

"Why not?" He had almost shouted. He fought himself under control again, then said, "I'm sorry. It's been pretty rough. Please, where did she go? Do you know why she moved?"

"Well, after her husband died she didn't want the house anymore — said it was too big for her, that it reminded her of him. Gave us a real good price, to get rid of it quickly — I don't know if we could have afforded a place this nice otherwise."

His throat tightened, and he felt as if a great weight had fallen from his back, as he remembered what hope was. "Her husband died?"

"Oh, about five months ago. Didn't you know?"

"No, we've been out of touch for a year now. Family argument."

"Oh, that's too bad. Well, he died — car crash. Hit by a drunk driver while he was running some errand for her."

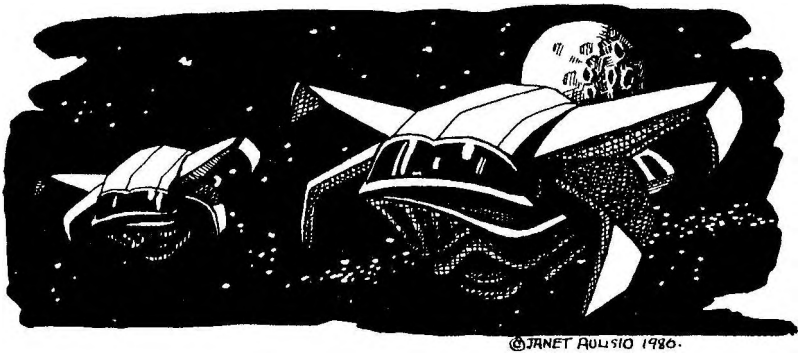
"I'm very sorry to hear that," he said, forcing his lips not to smile, and inwardly wondering that he could be so delighted by news of his own death.

"Yes, well, so was she, I guess. She was about the sorriest woman I ever saw, Mrs. Criswell was. She said she just couldn't live in this world without him, so she wrapped up her affairs, sold her belongings, and went down to the Holiday Inn out on Route Four and jumped into that thing there, the

Hole, they call it. Said she'd find him somewhere — that there had to be a world where he lived and she died, and she'd find it if it took the rest of her life. So you see, mister, I can't help you find her; she's gone."

Hope vanished, and he plummeted anew into desperation. He said nothing more, just turned and walked down the path. He had been so close, so very close! If only she had waited! He would find her yet! She was somewhere in the Hole, somewhere in the universes that the Hole could reach, searching for him.

He turned onto the sidewalk and began running, back toward the Hole, toward his only hope, running and crying like a lost child.



MAGNETOLIFE

by Phillip C. Jennings
art: George Barr

The author has sold SF stories to The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction, Far Frontiers, *and* Amazing® Stories. *In hopes of avoiding the overworked themes of time travel, flying saucers, and ants inside a human body, he is currently working on a sure-fire science-fiction tale involving cheese. A hint to agents and publishers — he's also written a novel,* not *about cheese; all inquiries to him are welcome.*

Another nine-by-twelve envelope in the mailbox. Damn! I carried the mail back to the house and tore it open.

How could they turn down "Magnetolife?" It was polished, cogent, and filled with well-developed characters. What patently ridiculous excuse had they used this time? I seethed at the rejection slip, which read, "The plot needs focus. Too many lectures. Part of this might be rewritten as a science article."

I retired to my office cubby, sat heavily, and glared at a corkboard littered with notes beginning "Thanks for letting us read your story" and ending "but I'm afraid it won't work for us." Hell, *scientists* write science articles. Folks like me study them to find subjects for our stories. I'd got this one from a *Science News* column describing the single biggest object in the solar system.

No, not the sun. As it happens, Jupiter is surrounded by a magnetic zone vastly larger than Old Sol. The sun may not even be the hottest thing around, since the few particles in the bow of Jove's magnetosphere are energized to several million degrees.

Imagine an ocean of ions! If we could see it, that blob of flux would oppress our skies.

Put "ocean" and "energy" together and what do you get? Life! My mind leapt over the fact that I hadn't the slightest idea how electromagnetic life might feed or reproduce. For my purposes, little ball lightning beasties would work splendidly.

In medieval times people saw angels. Coming out of rural bars at two A.M., modern visionaries see glowing cigars capable of boggling changes of course. Now I had something to add to the flying saucer controversy. "Magnetolife" explained everything. The UFOs were interested in us because we used electricity on a novel scale. They'd made Earth's Van Allen belt into a way station, from which explorers descended to ponder our power stations and zap the batteries in our cars.

I reviewed my story to restore my faith in it, then stuck it in a new envelope and composed a cover letter. My choices were narrowing; this time "Magnetolife" would go to an editor whose form rejections clearly proscribed tales of flying saucers. It was one step better than consigning the tale to the wastebasket, and I wasn't very happy about it.

When Angie got home from work, she noticed the way I nourished myself on Southern Comfort while cooking dinner. "What's wrong?" she asked, massaging my shoulders in a fit of sympathy.

"Why do editors have these curt, no-nonsense names? If there was one named Von Scaramouche, *he'd* publish my work."

"It's getting late in the year, hon," she reminded me, reverting to type. "The IRS won't let us deduct a penny of your expenses unless you earn some income soon."

"That's right. Something to justify joint filing; otherwise all this is just a

dropout's hobby. Three thousand bucks for a word processor, four hundred for furniture —"

"Aren't there any regional magazines? One of those fanzines, maybe?"

"If I got rejected by a regional, I'd kill myself. It would be too humiliating."

After dinner I picked up my favorite mag to figure out what these stories had that mine lacked. I found the answer to my problems on the next-to-last page. It was an ad, and it began, "THE TRUTH ABOUT JESUS! Send one dollar for my brochure. . . ."

Income, that's all the IRS cared about. If I got income from writing, I could deduct dollar for dollar from this year's expenses; a game called double or nothing. Then there was my ego: it might cost fifty bucks to place an ad, but if one sucker sent for my booklet, I'd have crossed the line from hobbyist to professional.

As for the booklet, why not call it *Magnetolife*? THE TRUTH ABOUT FLYING SAUCERS, I'd subtitle it. I wouldn't be lying. I didn't know my speculations were true, but I didn't know they were false either. In any event I wouldn't be socking the public for more than a dollar each.

I had just enough time to get my ad in the December issue. I ran off a few copies of my story to handle the response, and turned my attention to more pressing concerns.

The December magazine went out. By midmonth I had to take *Magnetolife* to one of those instant printing places to handle the press of inquiries. I reached break-even before Christmas. That's when I got the letter from Pavel Ouschtrenko.

Pavel lived in one of Washington's Maryland suburbs and wanted to set up an organization there devoted to the "right kind" of flying saucer lore. I answered a few questions and suggested a reading list. Next month he wrote again, asking if I'd consider visiting his chapter of the society.

"What society?" Angie asked, holding the letter. She marched into my cubby in her blue trial suit, which meant she'd been prosecuting attorney today up at the county seat.

I considered my answer carefully. Angie was always feisty on blue-suit days. "My booklet's become the bible of a new cult," I shrugged. "Your husband's now a guru to the lunatic fringe."

"You'll never make it," the love of my life snickered. "If there's one thing you ain't got, it's charisma. One look at you, and their hearts are gonna sink."

"Nope. If folks think I'm God's gift to humanity, that's exactly how they'll see me."

Nevertheless, I wasn't prepared to fly off to Washington. I wrote back, declining the invitation. To soften the blow, I provided Pavel with a few insights about electronic life forms.

You see, there are the Aeolians, an advanced race whose representatives station themselves in the Van Allen belt and scout us out of curiosity. Then we have the primitive populations of Van Allen, island species isolated for millennia from the Jovian magnetosphere. These dull-wits are drawn to Earth to sate their appetites. Smog keeps them away from our cities (they hate the heavy-ion ambience), so they prey on rural high-voltage power lines, hydroelectric generators, et cetera.

Too bad, because our electrical network is "transformational," a word I adopted to describe the idea that when yon critters zoom in on a tempting coronal discharge, their bodies are reshaped along imposed patterns. Drawn like moths to the flame, my hapless fuzzballs are torn to pieces.

This gave the gentle hearts of Pavel's society something to think about. Our national power grid might be responsible for the extinction of unknown forms of life! They wrote back, pleading for information on how to prevent this disaster. Without intending it, I'd converted a bunch of discussion groups into a movement.

"Get out of this racket," Angie growled. "It's not doing your career any good. When editors see 'Cliff Whitecope' on an envelope they think 'Oh yeah, that flying saucer kook.' "

"I'm using a pseudonym," I mumbled.

"That proves it. If you believed in this magneto-crap, it'd be different. As it is, you despise these people. Soon it'll rub off, and you'll start despising yourself."

I hit the carriage return and swung my eyes from my word processor's screen to her pinstriped torso. Blue again! Time for appeasement. "I try to do a good job, dear. I went down to the city yesterday to talk to Willie. God knows I can't tell cathodes from anodes, but if I'm telling people how to keep alien fuzzballs from committing hara-kiri, it'll be advice a double-E could grudgingly respect."

Angie rolled her eyes. "You've got Willie in on this? Great! I always thought he was honest. Christ, Cliff! This business isn't just corrupting you anymore —"

"Willie doesn't like it either, not as a scam. Nor do I. I'm not doing anything but feeding Pavel dribs and drabs now and again. He's the big wheel."

"Why do it?"

"Intellectual curiosity. I'm on the inside, watching an organization grow from nowhere. There's loads to be learned about human psychology. Then there's the gaming aspect. I'm playing a role, abiding by rules that I feel out as I go along. It's a challenge to do it right."

Hands on her hips, my wife spat out an accusation. "Yesterday you told me it was Pavel. You said you didn't dare wreck his house of cards —"

I shrank another inch. "He really believes this shit, you know. He and all those other loonies. You should see the letters I get! If I jumped ship, some might not be able to cope."

Angie moved to the stairs. "I can't stand this anymore. Cliff, my professional reputation's suffering by my association with you, and anyhow, I think this game of yours is pretty low."

"You're leaving?"

"Call it a trial separation. It's me or Pavel. When you've freed yourself from his clutches, give me a call."

Did Angie sound a bit careerist? That was one of the epithets I flung at her during the next half-hour, when I should have been repenting my wicked ways. Look at it this way. A parent's love might come unearned, but not a wife's. When Angie met me, I was preaching against the evils of the war in Vietnam. The high-minded Cliff Whitecope who earned her affections had grown less strident with time, but this was her first proof that I'd slid from mere cynicism into full-fledged moral retreat.

Angie's departure was the beginning of a new era in my life. I couldn't go to her for money, so I had to consider other avenues. I wrote to Pavel to ask if his offer still stood. Would he arrange a lecture tour? Could he guarantee me three thousand dollars after expenses?

He called to assure me on all counts, and his letter two days later included a check to cover air fare. It was a generous sum; I could have lived in the Yukon and made it to Dulles International with change to spare.

So I showed up at last, this mysterious figure with all the insights. I have pictures from those days. They show a man riddled with guilt and travel fatigue being escorted by a bald Tartar from plane to hotel. Private sessions and policy questions kept me so busy I didn't have time to develop a proper case of stage fright before they led me to the lectern.

Once I began to speak, I was home free. I liked to talk. Fielding questions from the floor was a novel kind of mental exercise, far more exhilarating than crosswords, and I was great at it. Pavel was all aglow after my first lecture: he'd hitched his wagon to a rising star.

By the end of the week I was a phenomenon. A local daytime TV show made inquiries about an interview. Flying saucer groupies camped in the hotel lobby on the chance that they'd see me sweeping through. My room number (changed several times) had to be kept a secret. It was all very exhausting. I told Pavel to defer our business meetings until later, when I could cope with them. "We'll handle stuff like that over the phone. Just you and me."

That last was a telling remark. In Pavel's society everyone fought to be the inside man, the woman in the know. These folks were hierarchy-minded, and I was sole custodian of rank. Two fellows strove to persuade me they were of equal stature with Pavel, leaders of their own flocks of disciples. Pavel was terribly jealous of his position, and what I said was like a laying on of hands.

I didn't like telling all these lieutenants they were special, yet little phrases

like "I've got my eye on you" meant the world to them. Another thing I didn't like was the fact that we were exacting twelve-dollar "contributions" from old ladies who couldn't afford to waste retirement incomes on shysters like me. When I called Pavel, I raised the issue.

"We should focus our activities on, uh, community leaders, professional people, and that sort. I'm envisioning a series of retreats at two hundred per —"

"Five hundred," Pavel interrupted.

"Five hundred. Attendance by invitation. Let's work on academic types and so on. We need to raise our sights."

There were a hundred people at the first retreat, and I cleared five hundred bucks per head on ninety. I expanded *Magnetolife* into a privately printed book and sold out the first edition. One of Pavel's competitors opened a chapter of my society in Berkeley, so my name was invoked from coast to coast. It was an exciting summer, and I celebrated by buying a cherry-red Triumph TR3.

I motored down to the city to visit Willie. I found him evasive, embarrassed to see me on his doorstep. He didn't invite me inside.

"Is there something wrong?" I asked.

"I can't have you come here anymore, Cliff. I look at you and see this sleazy glad-hander. . . ."

My face fell. "Truth to tell, it's no fun except when the check comes in the mail. It's boring telling the same story over and over. If I could go back to being a writer, I'd be able to hop from one fable to the next."

"Have you talked to Angie?"

Had I talked to Angie! Angie of the luxuriant black hair, Angie the incomparable, whose lush round hips metronomed down the dim passages of my memory with me in goatish pursuit. . . . I cleared my throat. "She doesn't like me to phone. I'm supposed to give all this up."

"Why don't you? They tell me your outfit's trying to bullshit the IRS about being a religious organization. Look what happened to Reverend Moon. I don't want to see you in jail."

I sighed. "Let me in, Willie. I'll tell you why it isn't that easy."

He led me to his couch and brought out a couple of beers. "Okay, shoot."

"I've met about three hundred people through this scam, and there's two thousand more I know as faces. They've all placed their trust in me. Lord knows I don't deserve it, but if they ever find out, most'll be devastated. Some might be driven to suicide. Then there's the tiny minority that'll resolve to punish me. I've stolen their money and their time —"

"It'll only get worse. How can you back out gracefully? You might as well take your lumps now."

"It's funny you should mention it. There *is* a way I can cut free and kill this monster I've created at the same time. The thing is, I'll need your help."

"What do you have in mind?" Willie asked.

"I want you to collect some experts, people whose hackles rise every time

my name is mentioned. You guys figure out how to lure one of my magnetolife creatures. Put in loads of tests to make sure nothing's there so I can't rattle off some flimflam about it's being too weak to wiggle.

"I'll stick my neck out and advertise your criteria. I'll announce a big rally somewhere in the center of the country and encourage everyone to attend. Pavel will like that, he gets off on crowds."

Willy grinned. "Put up or shut up, eh?"

"Yeah. I'll box myself in. We'll have a high-drama countdown. When there's nothing but an empty space at the zero moment, I'll just stand there with egg on my face. My devotees will slink off without blaming me; after all, I did my best."

"I'm not sure human psychology works that way. You'd better have a helicopter standing by."

I laughed and shook my head. "What a farce! And what'll we learn from it? I suppose if my pratfall is grand enough, I could interest a publisher in my story. Hey, know what? I'm going to start making notes, then write a proposal to Salem & West in New York. . . ."

"Leave me out of your book," Willie responded. "Just tell me this. Who's picking up the tab for all the equipment? A magnetolife cage won't come cheap, you know."

"Let me get on the horn to Pavel. He'll come up with the money."

Pavel thought it was a great idea. "It'll put us on the map," he confided. "We'll draw TV coverage. Have you thought of where to locate the show?"

"Someplace where they don't have much electricity. It'll take almost till winter to set up, so let's make it somewhere south."

"Leave it to me. Have your electronics people send me the bill, and I'll take care of it."

When I hung up, Willie tapped my shoulder. "You didn't say anything about a helicopter."

"One thing at a time, Willie. Anyhow, you'll be safe. You don't need to stand at the lectern with me."

I went home and waited while the second edition of *Magnetolife* sold out. Meanwhile, Pavel grew more ecstatic with every phone call.

"We started with fifty members," he told me. "Since then we've doubled in size every month. We hit the doldrums after you left the lecture circuit to focus on retreats, but with this magnetotrap rally everybody's curious again. We could charge a hundred per ticket and fill the halls if you went on tour again."

"Nope. It wears me out too much. I think that's why I'm not getting many insights these last months."

"Well, Cliff — can I call you Cliff? You see, our Oklahoma arrangements are costing a lot of money, and we might not be able to cover our commitments from preregistrations alone."

"What are we talking about? Give me a round figure."

"Eight hundred thousand dollars. Maybe more than that. Maybe a million."

By the grace of God I kept on my feet. "But if I go on tour?" I croaked.

"Then there's no problem. We'll line up six cities on the east coast and a couple on the west."

I called Angie from the airport. "Have faith in me, honey," I begged. "I'll look like the biggest fool in creation for a while, but I'm trying to wriggle free. By the time I'm done, nobody in America will buy a used car from me. Willie can tell you the details."

"You worm! I've heard about your rally in Oklahoma."

"Want to come? I can get you a ticket."

The phone went click. An hour later I was airborne for Boston.

My labors over the next three weeks insured we'd have money for that helicopter Willie was so worried about. Pavel even provided me with a pair of bodyguards. Salem & West bit on my idea for a self-exposé and sent a $10,000 advance. With everything going my way, in early October I went down to the rally site to watch my enemies construct their magnetolife cage.

Willie hadn't told them I wanted to look ridiculous; it might have taken the heart out of their labors. I goaded them into paroxysms of zeal with bubbly, ill-informed questions. No one could be as calmly cheerful as I unless he had an ace up his sleeve. They redoubled their efforts to make sure I couldn't use holography or some other trick to save my reputation.

Other workers completed the helicopter pad, installed porta-potties, and set up camera platforms. I exercised the intercom system by lecturing to a crowd of early arrivals. When the day finally came, Pavel caught my sleeve to inform me that fifty-two thousand flying saucer fans had forked over fifty bucks for the privilege of spreading their blankets on cold scrubland.

Fifty-two thousand true believers! My black heart quailed, but this was no time to change course. I climbed to my lectern, waited for the cameramen to focus on my freshly shaven countenance, took a sip of water, and started to describe what was on the agenda.

"Welcome one and all to this historic event," I began. "Today six distinguished scientists and engineers, their reputations uncompromised by friendliness to our ideas, are here to bear witness to the fact that electromagnetic life actually exists!

"Guided by the claims in my book, they built a coronal lure, designed to retract into a cage whose positive-ion walls are guaranteed to hold the nearest UFO. In this cage they've placed styrofoam balls small enough to be shifted by the tiniest of electrical charges. In addition, and just in case our visitor prefers not to glow, the whole apparatus has been cooled to make a 3D cloud chamber. Cameras of a dozen special types have been readied to snap the first truly authenticated picture of a so-called flying saucer."

(The coolant added a nice dry-ice effect, billows of *Sturm und Drang.*

When I sold movie rights to my autobiography, I'd make sure they played up this touch.)

Now for the punch. "I've placed my reputation on the line. When I flip this switch, power will be fed to the lure and the clock over this lectern will start to tick. In sixty seconds a creature will approach and settle within the confines of the cage behind me. Ladies and gentlemen, let's move this lectern so you can see it more clearly."

I waited for the move, then entertained them with more hyperbole. At last, just as the crowd began to wonder if I was stalling, I closed the circuit.

"Sixty," I shouted into the microphone. "Fifty-nine, fifty-eight, fifty-seven . . ."

Blue juice shot skyward; Baron Frankenstein couldn't have asked for better effects. ". . . Fifty-six, fifty-five . . ." The crowd took up the chant, but for some reason they lost steam around forty. "Ahh," they gasped in a collective sigh. I looked up to see what they were gawking at.

It was shaped like a giant football and nosed quickly down into the electromagnetic trap. With the flip of a switch the cage was capped and its prisoner repelled from every side. I clutched the lectern to keep from falling in a dead faint as it rolled and squirmed, covering itself in Styrofoam. The video footage they took right then is ample proof of my astonishment; for ten seconds I stood with my mouth open before it occurred to me that this wasn't exactly the role I was called upon to play.

"Ah, eh, ahem," I began. "While the experts check this out, I'd like to say that the Magnetolife Society will be pleased to donate this apparatus to any reputable scientific institution interested in contacts between humans and extraterrestrial life forms."

I waited. A few people shook free of their trance and began to applaud. In a moment the decibel level reached rock-concert heights. Pavel tottered to the lectern to give me a hug, and in a twinkling I found myself carried into the audience. Souvenir-hungry enthusiasts pressed close and emerged from the melee with bits of my clothing. Medics ran from the mobile clinic to administer aid to those getting trampled in all the excitement.

Twenty minutes passed before I managed to break loose. Rendered anonymous by a Red Cross blanket, I hobbled around the podium to find Willie. I grabbed his jacket. "We've got to talk. Can you come to my trailer?"

"Not now," he responded. "We're still running tests. Hey, do me a favor and call — no, they wouldn't believe you."

"I've a phone you can use. Just tell me what we've got here. What's it look like?"

"You should know! It's one of your dimwit fuzzballs, that's all!"

"Don't start talking like this, Willie. It isn't funny. What's Angie going to think now? She'll never trust me again! Am I going to have Pavel hanging around my neck for the rest of my life?"

"What am I, a soothsayer?" Willie snarled. "I handle integrated circuits,

not human relations. Now lead me to your telephone!"

That's my story in a nutshell. It's not a bad life, being a guru. Angie and I have made real progress: we've gotten to where she'll take my calls. There's no reason to despair. Someday she'll forgive me. Someday I'll persuade her to move out to Malibu and live with me in my beach house.

Salem & West was kind enough to accept my offer to write a very different story than the one I first planned, so I didn't have to return my advance. As for Pavel, my phone service takes care of him pretty well most of the time. Freed from attendance on that ringing monster, I spend my days writing science fiction under the name Jay Carling.

Don't bother looking for my stuff. Jay hasn't managed to get published yet. He will, though. I'm sure of that. There's something called pure dumb luck, and I've reason to believe it's on my side. ✪

DADDY'S GONE A-HUNTING; OR, DON'T FORECLOSE ON A WERE

Pa wrapped hisself in a cougar skin
and did old banker Cladwell in,
but fust he kilt the big watch dawg
and chomped his full on the fat prize hawg.

Now the hounds might find that painter's scent,
but they'll never know where the big cat went,
for Pa's one swift and clever were;
he'll change to human and then appear
with dawg and gun (that dawg is me)
to join the hunting coterie.

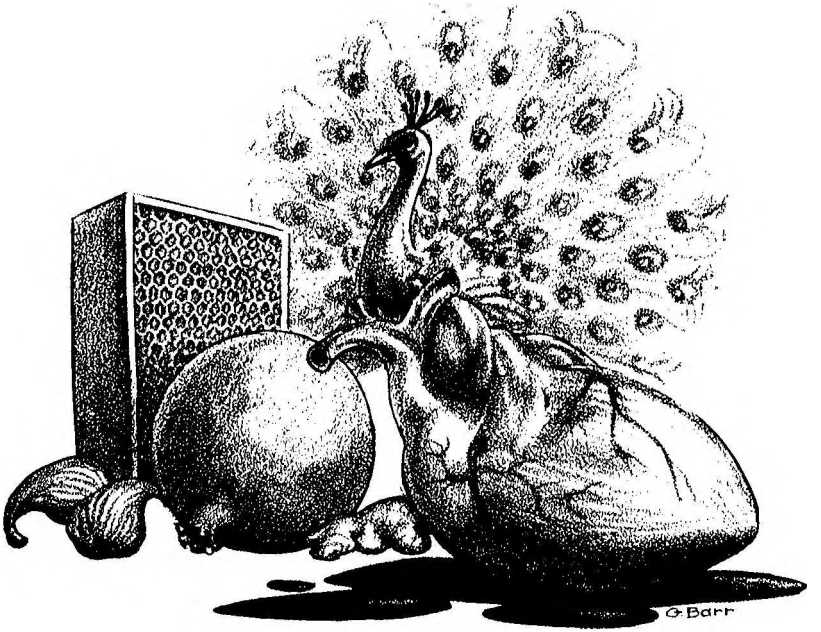
There'll be one long and merry chase,
but the killer cat will leave no trace.
Then I'll lead them dawgs to Fenokee Fen,
where that big ol' gater (that's Ma) done et three men.
Them hunters'll cuss, and grumble, and then go home
and leave us were-folk all alone.

— Morris Liebson

MAJOR WEIR'S BOOKCASE

by Christine Carmichael

art: George Barr



Christine Carmichael was born in Edinburgh, Scotland, where she later received a B.S. in physics. She taught for four years in the Bahamas, then went on to obtain a Ph.D. in experimental solid-state physics from the University of N. S. W. in Sydney, Australia. While attending the Worldcon in Australia in 1985, she met SF writer Jonathan V. Post, whom she married the following year in California. Christine currently works in the research department of an electro-optical firm.

This is her first fiction sale to a U.S. publisher, though she has had several stories published in Australia. She and her husband have had a poem, "I'm Going Home" (May 1988), published in Amazing® Stories.

Connie MacLean swept imperiously into the antique shop, but her arrogant attitude was not the inspiration for the murder.

"Hurry up, Oswald. The table is booked for twelve-thirty, and I've got a taxi waiting outside."

She fumed with impatience as he replaced the Famille Rose plate in the window display, setting it on its stand with loving care. He was being annoyingly slow, she thought, deliberately keeping her waiting. She flounced out to the taxi. Watching him lock the door, she compared his coarsened features and thin, colourless hair with her memories of the glorious Oswald she had married. At twenty-six his skin had been as clear as a maiden's, his auburn hair as thick as fox fur. But eighteen years had passed, and now he was overweight and over forty. She, on the other hand, could still pass for twenty-five, in the right light. Maybe it was time for a change.

At the restaurant, he ordered Beef Wellington.

"I need something filling on a cold day like this. How you keep going on a plate of salad, I'll never know."

"I take care of myself, Oswald. If you ate properly, instead of stuffing yourself with animal fat and refined flour every day, you would feel a hundred per cent better."

"But I'm perfectly all right the way I am, dear."

"Hmm. Well, you don't look it. You're more decrepit than Cary Grant was at sixty, and when I think of Paul Newman, why you're years younger than he, though no one would ever guess."

"Don't compare me with actors. You know what I think of them. I'll be forty-five soon, and a man should have a certain air of maturity at that age."

"If I can keep myself youthful and attractive, there's no reason why you can't, too. It only needs a little effort."

She was right about one thing, he thought, she was more beautiful than any woman he knew. But he said, "And the assistance of a battery of makeup artists. You spend hours on your appearance, and not just for the cameras."

She changed the subject, annoyed and surprised at the criticism.

"I have to fly to London this evening, to record an interview. I'll be back on Sunday afternoon."

"You go to London far too often, these days."

He suspected she had a boy friend there, but fearing to precipitate a shattering argument or, worse still, an admission of infidelity, he said nothing and let her go.

She was his obsession, the whole meaning of his life. For all he knew, she might be planning to leave him. He would not permit such a course of action. Under no circumstances would he release her from the marriage. The problem was how to stop her. Rarely had he ever won a battle of wills with Connie.

He was very gloomy, returning to the shop. When he saw the bureau-

bookcase in the back room, his spirits revived somewhat. He had bought it at a house sale the previous day and had not yet had time to examine it properly. A well-preserved example of Jacobean craftsmanship, it was a treat to behold. Such fine carving. Beautiful wood. The history was interesting, too. Major Weir was the last warlock executed in Scotland. He had been burned at the stake in the Grassmarket in 1737. His sister was also convicted of witchcraft and was rolled down Calton Hill in a barrel. With spikes on the inside.

If I can convince the collectors that this piece actually did belong to the last black magician to die for the cause, I'll be able to make a real killing, thought Oswald.

It was almost possible. The pedigree was sufficiently vague as to suggest a link between the Weirs and the old crone who had owned the bookcase. He caressed the dark wood, savouring the texture of the age-softened grain. Only once had he come across something as fine as this, and that was years ago. He remembered it quite well. It had a clever, secret compartment, a common enough feature in period furniture. He wondered, could this one also. . . ?

It fell open to his expert touch. A puff of ancient dust drifted forth, revealing its contents, which had lain undisturbed for generations. Oswald drew out the yellowed sheaf of paper, tattered with age, like a pile of irresistible leaves from some tree perhaps best left alone. Taking them into the office, he slumped into his leather armchair. They were covered with tight, faded writing, which he read with difficulty.

To gain the power of interference with the snow . . .

It seemed to be some sort of spell for dispelling snowstorms. Turning to the next sheet, he discovered a remedy for the ague, including fringe benefits for sufferers of gout. Further on, he encountered incantations to be used in the event of a pregnant woman being unable "to bring forth the fruit of her womb." A gruesome case history was included that described one Isabel McNicol, who under the influence of a curse, had the misfortune to carry her child for twenty years, before she was delivered of a bearded, toothy infant.

Amongst the recipes, Oswald was especially intrigued by a method for "holding a maid in thrawl," which the scribe had obtained from an Italian sorcerer called Asinanca.

> *He asked for three rubies, which amount I paid without dispute, for I was besotted. Asinanca is well kent in Genoa, and I doubted not the validity of his claims for the potion. They proved to be true: the lass succumbed. Here I record the manner of its making. . . .*
>
> *A sweet liquor is prepared from figs and pomegranates crushed in honey and spiced with ginger. This masks the flavour of the active ingredients from detection. At dawn, add the eye of peacock, powdered. Then mix therein the chopped heart of a murdering Moor.*

Oswald sighed. Figs, pomegranates, ginger, and honey were easy enough. Even the eye of peacock was accessible, if a little messy. He had a pair of the birds strutting round the garden of his country house. But the last ingredient was unobtainable in this day and age.

On Sunday, his wife returned. She brought the cold into the house with her.

"You will only strain your eyes, reading by that lamp," she said, turning on the overhead light. He rose from the sofa to kiss her, but she avoided his embrace.

"What's the matter, dearest?" he enquired, gently.

"I have decided to get a divorce. I want to marry someone else," she replied, praying, God, don't let there be a scene.

"Who is it?" He was white with the terror of hearing that which he had dreaded most of all. Let it not be true, he prayed.

"Matthew Jarrott, the sensation of the season. He is the greatest actor of the decade. He really lives his roles. I met him when he was here for the Festival."

She slid out of the study, leaving him in silence and misery. Upstairs, she packed suitcases. He heard them bump the banisters on the way down, but made no move to help. She looked in on him on her way out.

"Matthew will collect the rest of my things in the morning. I can't manage all of them now. Early in the morning. We have to be back in London in time for his performance of Othello." ✪

PROSPERO'S THIRD THOUGHTS

My island lives, a seedling of the sea,
Where Ariel sings our secret roundelay.
Were my drowned power to surge from sleeping waves,
I would return and summon his belief
To magic's pageant, a final fantasy,
For I have lost the last of my old dreams
In reaching out the brittle bones of age —
My love grows duller; all that glows is pain.
Each passion in its motion meets this winter;
At best, delay will furbish us until we enter:
I wait in rags of flesh and ducal clothes
To claim that darkness I have always owned.
So, sheathed with frost, the December rose
Goes glittering to its bleak repose.

— Ace G. Pilkington

SIX-LANE HIGHWAYS TO ELFLAND: Is Fantasy Getting Too Commercial?

by Darrell Schweitzer

ESSAY

Darrell Schweitzer is currently a coeditor of Weird Tales, *and editor of several books of criticism:* Discovering H. P. Lovecraft, Discovering Classic Horror Fiction, Discovering Horror Fiction II, *and* Nova: New Voices in Science Fiction. *In addition to his editorial work, the author has also written short stories that have appeared in* Twilight Zone, Night Cry, *and* Amazing® Stories. *His works in progress include a fantasy novel, a book on the art of writing fantasy, and an anthology of stories about a spaceport bar.*

Recently, a middle-range horror (er, excuse me: dark fantasy) writer-turned-columnist, in the process of stating his prejudices and generally orienting his readers to the first installment of his column, provided a hate list. "Things I Ain't Thrilled About," he called it. He wasn't thrilled about some fairly predictable things, including "sanctimonious phonies like Reagan" and "fundamentalist Bible-thumpers who demand the whole country be as pinheaded as they." Turning to literature, he got a little more incisive: "The deification of writers whose only triumph is to have outlived the rest of their generation."

But the first thing on the whole list, out there in front of Reagan and the bible-thumpers, is "elves 'n' fairies 'n' magic kingdom fantasy novels."

The remarkable thing about that statement, coming from a professional in our field, is that it isn't remarkable at all. It's a commonplace. Fantasy has been taking quite a bashing of late. Science-fiction writers and horror writers speak of fantasy with contempt, in exactly the same way some mainstream critics speak of science fiction and horror. There have been articles in the critical journals with titles like "Fantasy as Pollution" and "Fantasy as Cancer." A prominent editor, announcing a new book line, sneers, "People who write about elves and dragons need not apply." Listen wherever the pros gather, and you'll surely overhear "so-and-so is writing fantasy now" uttered in the tone that used to be reserved for "he writes westerns on the sly" or "she actually makes her living writing romances" or even "*he* writes romances."

Critics and fans follow suit. The common perception is that this abstract thing called a "fantasy novel" (which usually comes in trilogies) is a sort of wimpy adventure story set in a mock-medieval never-neverland populated by cute things in which innocence always triumphs over evil and the emotional tone is calculated not to give thirteen-year-old girls nightmares.

Think of it as paint-by-numbers Tolkienism.

Everybody is quick to dissociate himself from that sort of book. Our friend the columnist was just part of the general stampede.

Probably some of the readers of *Amazing Stories* are proud of the fact that you can't stand most fantasy. I know. When I was editorially associated with this magazine, I saw your letters.

But this is all the bashing of straw men. It sounds remarkably like what grim-voiced English teachers used to intone when they caught their students reading that weird stuff with spaceships and robots on the covers: "Science fiction is *not literature*."

Remember? How little we learn from our experience.

So, why even bother to address the issue?

Because, as any sociologist or politician knows, public *perception* of the facts is often as important as the facts themselves. The perception of fantasy in our field today, both among writers and among readers, is that fantasy is somehow a subcellar of science fiction: formalized, thematically inconsequential, not as intellectually rigorous, and often dashed off in multi-book series by hacks after a quick buck.

That's a perception. Stop and think, fantasy-haters out there: if I say that author X has just written a "fantasy novel," what do you expect? The wimpy sort of adolescent adventure I've described. A quest plot. You imagine that the prose will either be utterly bland or an awkward attempt at archaism. You probably even have a good idea of what the cover will look like.

Worse yet, you may be *right.* Perception shapes reality. Writers, editors, and publishers meet reader expectations.

This would all have been quite incredible twenty years ago. In 1967 there was *sword and sorcery* alive and well for the bashing, those books with covers by ersatz-Frazettas about imitation-Conans in fur loincloths. Not much was ever expected of those. But *fantasy* was treated with respect. It was caviar, rare, exotic, and to be savored. Sword and sorcery was potato chips, and no one confused the two.

Now that has all changed. Whether fantasy itself has changed is open to question, but clearly the perception of fantasy has changed. In the past twenty years it has, for the first time, become a *genre*, and, it would seem, a genre of ill-repute.

Before we proceed, let's define a few terms.

Genre means literary category. Arguably, there are only two kinds of books in American publishing, genre books and brand-name books. If the primary sales appeal arises from the *kind* of story, then it's a genre book. A science-fiction novel by a new writer is a genre book. It has a science-fictional cover. It is bought and edited by the science-fiction editor at the publishing house. It appears in the science-fiction section of that publisher's catalogue and is

placed in the science-fiction rack in the bookstore. It bears the science-fiction label. It sells more because it is science fiction than because it is by a particular author, and is designed, promoted, and distributed accordingly.

A brand-name book sells because it is by a particular author. Some science-fiction writers have indeed become brand names, as have some fantasy and horror writers, but best sellers by Robert Heinlein or Stephen King or (to cite *The Silmarillion* as the ultimate example) J. R. R. Tolkien sell because they are by those authors, not because they happen to be science fiction or horror or fantasy. Indeed, Heinlein can publish fantasy (such as *Job, A Comedy of Justice*) and King can publish science fiction (*Firestarter, The Dead Zone,* or two out of the four novels in *The Bachman Books*) or even epic fantasy (*The Eyes of the Dragon, The Stand, The Talisman*) and it hardly matters. They are still brand-name Heinlein or King books.

Very little else remains. There may have actually been something called "general fiction" in the early part of this century, but, since World War II at least, it's all been genres and brand names. There is a science-fiction genre and, closely related to it, a fantasy genre. Elsewhere we have a mystery/suspense genre, a romance genre, a men's adventure genre, and even what defensive science-fiction writers tired long ago of being labeled sci-fi by the press like to call a "SeriLit" genre.

This strategy prevails because it makes economic sense. It has nothing to do with art. Such art as may occur in any one of these genres is, from the point of view of a publisher's sales force, an irrelevant coincidence. A kind of Darwinian selection prevails in the marketplace. Those books that are best keyed to genre or brand-name promotional expectations win. Those that are not lose. A science-fiction novel by a little-known writer (therefore not a brand name) that is published merely as a *novel* and put in with the mainstream fiction will probably fail to find its audience. It will sell less well than if it had been published as science fiction, then drop into obscurity. Collectors have whole shelves of these books — *Full Circle* by John Collier, *Caleb Catlun's America* by Vincent McHugh, *The Twenty-Fifth Hour* by Herbert Best, *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star* by Ben Barzman — but no one else knows about them unless they get rescued by a genre-labeled reprinting.

Of course when a brand-name writer not ordinarily associated with science fiction writes a science-fiction novel, there is no reason to rescue it. *Brave New World* is securely in print — as an Aldous Huxley book.

What has this to do with fantasy? Everything. Prior to the genrification of fantasy in the early 1970s, fantasy consisted of a few brand-name books like T. H. White's *Once and Future King*, but mostly of mislabeled, poorly sold, and obscure, out-of-print titles. The fantasy reader was of necessity a collector who scoured used-book stores for precious volumes of Lord Dunsany, James Branch Cabell, William Morris, E. R. Eddison, Kenneth Morris, Clark Ashton Smith, James Stephens, and the rest. Sometimes he sought a

rare title by a well-known science-fiction writer, such as Poul Anderson's *The Broken Sword* or *The Well of the Unicorn* by George U. Fletcher (a.k.a. Fletcher Pratt).

There was no coherent way for publishers to reprint such books, even if an audience existed. These books were not science fiction, and it would be hard to imagine science-fiction readers flocking to buy *The King of Elfland's Daughter*. A few could be smuggled by as children's books, others as "literature." Alan Garner and Lloyd Alexander have always been published for children, even though adults read them. James Stephens has always had a certain security as an Irish writer, right along with James Joyce and Liam O'Flaherty, for all that his *The Crock of Gold* and *In the Land of Youth* are among the century's great fantasies.

No fantasy *genre* existed. Then, in the wake of the enormous popularity of the paperback editions of *The Lord of the Rings* (since 1965), it sprang into existence.

Defining *fantasy* is a much thornier matter than defining *genre* or explaining how publishing works.

At first remove, all fiction is fantasy. Fiction is what is *not fact.* It is about imaginary people involved in things that didn't happen. Even the most realistic historical or contemporary novel has a degree of detail no one could actually know. What were the inner thoughts of Napoleon on his way to St. Helena? A novelist makes it up. That is what a storyteller does.

In a modern sense, fantasy is the fiction of the impossible. The events in the story violate the rules of the known universe. Even here, nothing is hard and fast. To most of us, a novel about ghosts, witches, demons, and prognostication would be fantasy — but maybe not to an occultist.

I prefer the exclusionary approach:

If you exclude the element of crime and detection, and there is no story left, that must have been a detective story.

If you exclude the speculative scientific premise, and there is no story left, that must have been science fiction.

If you exclude the fantastic, the supernatural, and there is no story left, that was fantasy.

Fantasy differs from science fiction in two important ways. First, in science fiction the writer at least pretends that the unusual events are part of the physical universe, bound by scientific laws. The *wonder* in science fiction is rational, not supernatural. Fantasy is not rational. It makes use of a specified supernatural element, or else just the irrationality of dream.

Second, fantasy has a very different pedigree. Science fiction is a recent invention, branching off from the Gothic in the early 19th century. In *Trillion Year Spree* Brian Aldiss makes an excellent case for *Frankenstein* (1818) being the first true science-fiction novel.

Fantasy is as old as literature. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* is fantasy, as are the

works of Homer. The earliest complete novel still extant, *The Golden Ass* by Lucius Apuleius (circa A.D. 180) is a wonderful fantasy, in turns rollicking and horrifying, and ultimately transcendent. Fantasy abounds in medieval literature. William Shakespeare wrote one of the all-time great fantasies, *The Tempest*, from which the archetype of the elderly, mysterious, and ultimately kindly wizard derives.

Fantasy occurs in every culture, in every period, except perhaps during those times of extreme tyranny when the literary imagination is utterly crushed. There was no fantasy in Stalinist Russia. But otherwise it is everywhere.

What we erroneously call "mainstream," the fiction of contemporary life, realistically told, is about as old as science fiction. No doubt that the discovery of realism opened up an exciting new frontier of art. It captured a vast audience, mostly middle-class readers at first, who lacked the classical education needed to understand much fantasy, but then, as what literature professors call "the novel" developed, realistic fiction became more ambitious and complex. By the end of the 19th century, much of the best literary talent was going into realism, for all that the older form, fantasy, coexisted and was usually written by the same people. It is very hard to find a great writer who hasn't turned out at least a couple fantasies. Dostoyevsky, author of *Crime and Punishment*, also wrote "The Dream of the Ridiculous Man." Mark Twain, best-known for *Huckleberry Finn*, wrote such superb fantasies as "Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven" and "The Mysterious Stranger."

Science fiction became a genre in 1926 when the first issue of *Amazing Stories* appeared. Coincidentally, realism was the dominant genre in book publishing at the time. The brand-name authors were also realists: Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and others. Science fiction was rapidly relegated to the status of "pulp" magazine fiction, which was, in the eyes of critics, completely beneath notice. It was a long crawl back up into book publishing and some modicum of respectability.

Fantasy did not become a genre until about 1970. There was fantasy in the pulps, certainly, but fantasy was never exclusively a pulp genre. Cabell, Dunsany, Arthur Machen, and numerous others appeared in book form, as "literature" at the same time the pulp magazines were being published. Significantly, some of the best pulp fantasy novels, such as L. Sprague de Camp's *Lest Darkness Fall* (from *Unknown*, 1939) and de Camp and Pratt's *The Incomplete Enchanter* (1940) were reprinted almost immediately by major book publishers, who would never have considered the science fiction of the time.

But *Lest Darkness Fall* and *The Incomplete Enchanter* suffered from the lack of a fantasy genre. Published as "mainstream," they rapidly fell through the cracks and had to be rescued years later by the first science-fiction specialist publishers.

Crudely expressed, the converging histories of fantasy and science fiction

go like this:

Fantasy fell from the heights. Science fiction crawled up from the depths. They met in the middle.

The genrification of fantasy was inevitable. Now, in the United States, there is no broad shelf. There are only cubbyholes.

The fantasy cubbyhole came into existence when the word went out at Ballantine Books, publisher of the authorized editions of Tolkien, to "find another trilogy." They found two, Mervyn Peake's unclassifiable "Gothic" *Gormenghast Trilogy* (which is clearly fantasy, partaking not of the supernatural, but of dream, as does the work of Franz Kafka) and the assorted novels of E. R. Eddison, *The Worm Ouroboros* et al., which consist either of a novel-length prologue and a trilogy proper, or a tetralogy, or a novel, two sequels, and a fragment depending on how you look at it, but in any case epic writing of the highest order, magical tales told in magical prose.

There had to be more. There was. Under the editorship of Lin Carter, the Ballantine Adult Fantasy series began in 1969. Suddenly, all those non-brand-name fantasies that had languished in obscurity could be reprinted. It was a massive genre-rescue operation. Books by Dunsany, Cabell, Morris, and so many more could be packaged in a certain way, put in a certain rack in the store, and sold according to conventional genre strategies. Carter also discovered the first of a new wave of fantasy novelists: Evangeline Walton (whose *The Island of the Mighty* had languished unappreciated since 1936; she had sequels in the drawer, and is still writing new fantasy to this day), Katherine Kurtz, and Joy Chant.

The new genre did well, within limits. Carter once told me that the books sold as a function of their similarity to Tolkien. Thus, William Morris's *The Well at the World's End*, which is very like Tolkien, sold extremely well. G. K. Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday*, which isn't like Tolkien at all, bombed.

Fantasy was clearly different from science fiction, but bordering on it. It was (and still is) the genre next door, often edited by the same editors and (sometimes) written by the same writers, but at the same time quite distinct.

Nobody sneered at fantasy back in 1969, and nobody *dreamed* of writing it as hackwork. The market was not large. It had not yet proven itself as something particularly lucrative.

And the standards were enormously high. The standard against which new works were measured was, after all, *The Lord of the Rings.* Those older books reprinted by Carter were, for the most part, excellent. In pre-genre times, a fantasy book had to be quite exceptional to be published at all, when most book publishers preferred realism. Fantasy was always a risk, and it was usually a bad risk. So the writers who did get published extensively, like Lord Dunsany, James Branch Cabell, and Mervyn Peake, had to be geniuses.

Suddenly their books, or ones like them, had become commercial.

Commerce has no concern for genius. It can't be measured. In order to repeat the success of *The Lord of the Rings,* publishers sought other books of the same type. For a while they subsisted on reprints of old works that, coincidentally, happened to be of the highest literary quality. The few new books were also of high quality, vastly superior to the usual run of, say, mystery or science-fiction novels.

But as the demand increased and the supply of brilliant classics ran out, standards inevitably dropped.

Ursula Le Guin, whose *Earthsea* trilogy ranks among the very finest modern fantasies, saw the danger coming early on. She wrote in "From Elfland to Poughkeepsie" (1973):

> Elfland is what Lord Dunsany called the place. It is also known as Middle Earth, and Pyrdain, and the Forest of Broceliande, and Once Upon a Time; and by many other names.
>
> Let us consider Elfland as a great national park, a vast and beautiful place where a person goes by himself, on foot, to get in touch with reality in a special, private, profound fashion. But what happens when it is considered merely a place to "get away to"?
>
> Well, you know what has happened at Yosemite. Everybody comes, not with an ax and a box of matches, but in a trailer with a motorbike on the back and a motorboat on top and a butane stove, five aluminum folding chairs, and a transistor radio on the inside. They arrive totally encapsulated in a secondhand reality. And then they move on to Yellowstone, and it's just the same there, all trailers and transistors. They go from park to park, but they never really go anywhere; except when one of them who thinks that even the wildlife isn't real gets chewed up by a genuine, firsthand bear.
>
> The same sort of thing seems to be happening to Elfland, lately. A great many people want to go there, without knowing what it is they're really looking for, driven by a vague hunger for something real. With the intention or under the pretense of obliging them, certain writers of fantasy are building six-lane highways and trailer parks with drive-in movies, so that the tourists can feel at home just as if they were back in Poughkeepsie.
>
> But the point about Elfland is that you are not at home there. It's not Poughkeepsie. It's different.

Things have gotten worse since 1973, and folks on the outside are sneering, only halfway aware of what they are sneering at.

Arguably, the most *damaging* book in the history of fantasy has been *The Sword of Shanarra* by Terry Brooks. Ballantine/Del Rey published it in

1977, but by then things had changed. Lin Carter and the Ballantine Adult Fantasy series were out, and generic fantasy, produced to fill a slot, written to fulfill the expectations of other books of the same type, had become the order of the day. *The Sword of Shanarra* is a naive, point-by-point imitation of *The Lord of the Rings* that would have been completely unpublishable had not some shrewd soul (presumably Lester del Rey) realized that there was a vast audience of completely uneducated readers vaguely groping for something like *The Lord of the Rings*. They were the sort of folks who brought trailers to Yosemite.

The back cover blurb on *The Sword of Shanarra* tells all:

"For all those who have been seeking something to read since they finished *The Lord of the Rings.*"

Presumably, these readers had not been reading the Ballantine Adult Fantasy series. They were hooked on *one story*, and they wanted someone to tell them that same story again, however badly. They didn't *understand* that story, since *The Sword of Shanarra* is a impoverished work, utterly lacking the very characteristics which made *The Lord of the Rings* great: mythic imagination, good writing, an intense moral vision. True Tolkien aficionados can only look on *The Sword of Shanarra* with loathing and execration.

Lin Carter publically denounced it as the worst fantasy book of all time.

But it was too late. *The Sword of Shanarra* sold extremely well. Its sequels were the first fantasy-genre books *ever* to make the best-seller lists.

This is not to blame Terry Brooks or Lester del Rey for everything that followed. Once there was money to be made, there was plenty of guilt to go around. Those six-lane highways into Elfland were suddenly *big bucks.*

In a sense, all that had happened was that fantasy had fallen to the level of science fiction, detective fiction, and other genres. Genrification had been a blessing at first, in that it allowed the classics of the past to be reprinted. The same thing had happened in science fiction after World War II, when the first genre-book publishers concentrated on reprinting Heinlein, Asimov, E. E. Smith, and other greats.

But once the classics are all duly reprinted, there is an inevitable flood of new, inferior material, much of it written cynically and shoddily and edited just as cynically and shoddily. Within a few years a new generation of readers grows up aware of nothing *but* this inferior material. Some of these readers become writers. They tend to lack what you might call "serious literary intent." They are just genre-technicians, turning out more of the familiar product to fill those slots in the publisher's catalogue and on the genre shelf. Good books are still written and published (at least by the editors who aren't *too* cynical, or else those who truly can't tell and have had something pulled over on them), but they become difficult to find among all the bland *product.*

This is what has happened in fantasy today. As in most areas of publishing, the majority of books are not worth a discriminating reader's time.

There are, happily, enough to keep any such reader busy, but they are diamonds in the dungheap.

We really have no cause for complaint. Welcome to the real world. Publishing works that way. Most readers are *not* discriminating readers, and they vote with their dollars.

But to those of us who love fantasy, the bad books hurt more than, say, bad science fiction. The reason is simply, as Le Guin puts it, that Elfland is *different.*

Science fiction has the virtue of realism. Sometimes its ideas, which describe and apply to the real world, have an inherent interest beyond any story value. A hypothetical "hard" science novel might be wretched as a story, with flat characters, wooden prose, and ridiculous plotting, but it might also contain brilliant speculations on what it would actually be like to colonize Mars or meet alien life or live in a world totally transformed by the communications revolution. Such a book could be fascinating, almost as a kind of nonfiction, speculative science article, for all its literary value is nil.

But there is little fascination with the social mores of trolls or the mating habits of dragons or the intricate, technical details of sorcery. These things do not exist. They will never exist. Such speculations are a frivolous game, without the immediacy of the possible. Such elements, in a good fantasy story, are not there for speculative reasons at all, but as symbols, as *myth*, not for what they are but for what they suggest and *mean*. Le Guin speaks of getting "in touch with reality in a special, private, profound fashion."

Fantasy that fails to do this, that isn't *true* on some inner level, is like bad poetry, merely useless verbiage.

Fantasy has survived all this time, as the elder sister of every other form of fiction, because it does something special, and does it in a way impossible in other forms of storytelling.

I commend to your attention *The Tale and Its Master* by Michael Rutherford, a very short book (64 pp.) published by Spring Harbor Press. The story is no more than a long novelet, but it is by an entirely new writer who has obviously not forgotten what pre-generic fantasy was all about. There are occasional first-time stumbles; the narrative is occasionally choppy, and once in a while Rutherford hits a truly wrong note with his choice of words; but master-fantasist Lloyd Alexander summed up its virtues best:

> It's a splendid work. . . . The tale is both dazzling and dark, with a fine edge and vision that takes us close to heartache — which is to say that it lets us see things as they are.

Good fantasy is not an escape. It doesn't cover up reality. It *lets us see things as they are*, perhaps more clearly than any other kind of writing except the great myths. Homer, too, in *The Odyssey*, lets us see things as they are.

The Tale and Its Master is the story of Remus, scion of the Guild of Seers, Speakers, Dreamers, Storytellers, and Non-Fanatical Prophets. He lives in the town of Smunks, "Once upon a time."

Remus is enormously talented as a storyteller and is, in science-fictional terms, mildly telepathic. He can read and manipulate the minds of his audience. But he is also vain, greedy, and selfish.

To gain admittance to the guild he must go on a quest for a true story that has not previously been discovered. He expects this to be a snap, but it is not, and after much wandering he meets a witch who tells him an ambiguous fable of a thief who steals a baby dragon, tames it, and becomes a great lord as a consequence. But in time the thief marries, and the dragon destroys the pair. Was this out of the dragon's jealousy, or because by associating with his wife the dragon-master had become more human again and therefore vulnerable?

Remus does not grasp the import of this story, but he tells it so well that he is soon famous and rich. He scorns his parents, guild, and everyone he once knew. He is called before the king, who fears the storyteller-sorcerer's ability to sway crowds. The king is planning to have Remus killed. Remus is planning to have the king killed first. But, ingrate that he is, he fails to ritually thank the witch who gave him the story, and she appears in the form of a dragon, incinerating Remus, the king, and a good deal of the audience. She is in fact the baby dragon of her own story, the one that overthrew the dragon-master and his bride.

A story like *The Tale and Its Master* does not synopsize well, but that is the bare bones of it. It is beautifully written and imagined, and meaningful on many levels. It is about the importance of telling a tale, and very much about truth. Remus, after all, isn't supposed to make up his story, but *find* it. In a way Rutherford is writing about the nature of fantasy itself: it is powerful stuff, and dangerous when you have lost sight of your original vision. The story the witch tells Remus should have revealed to him some warning about his own nature. But, because of his nature, he paid no attention. So the ending of the story was *his* ending as well.

The Tale and Its Master is not science fiction. It is not a pseudo-serious speculation about the theory and practise of managing dragons. It is a story that could not be told in any way except as fantasy.

As science fiction, it would demand that added element of realism, which would be distracting. As a completely realistic, contemporary story, the author would have trouble even approaching such themes without seeming strained at the least, more likely irreparably hokey. Further, a contemporary setting would require social realism and period details that would, like the science-fiction writer's speculations, distract from the core of the story.

It has to be a fantasy. The setting is the standard one — mock-medieval — which is hardly detailed at all. The author's business is not to make up interesting new societies, but to get directly into the complex dream. The setting

is no more than "once upon a time." It is a blank backdrop against which the pure alloy of the story shines.

Le Guin explains fantasy in these terms:

> . . . it is still a game, but a game played for very high stakes. Seen thus, as art, not spontaneous play, its affinity is not with daydream, but with dream. It is a different approach to reality, an alternative technique for apprehending and coping with existence. It is not antirational but pararational; not realistic but surrealistic, superrealistic, a heightening of reality.

Only in fantasy can you get to the core of things, without distractions, without lots of apparatus. That is why storytellers in all ages, in all lands have turned to it.

Our friend the columnist is wrong. The problem with much contemporary fantasy is not "elves 'n' fairies 'n' magic kingdoms" but books that are merely empty. The problem is fantasy produced on the same level as any other pulp fiction, by writers who have forgotten what fantasy can be, or else never knew. They invoke the deepest, most profound level of storytelling, then *don't do anything at all.* Bad fantasy — and I doubt its detractors have read much of it — is not a matter of cuteness, but of routinely costumed characters wandering around made-up worlds failing to keep the reader awake. The trees and castles are cardboard, and the actors are reciting their lines, badly.

Good fantasy can't be mass-produced, any more than good poetry can. It will always be a matter of individual writers remaining true to their individual visions. Editors with vision and courage can help, by demanding the best of their writers, rather than the same olf stuff. If bad books can lower the expectations of a generation of readers, good ones can, presumably, raise them.

Genrification is with us whether we like it or not, so we might as well appreciate it for its benefits: now that there is a genre, it is easier for good books to be published and to find an audience. As for the bad ones, well, we just toss 'em aside while digging for the good ones.

Here are a few good, recent fantasies:

Weaveworld by Clive Barker (Poseidon Press, 1987, $19.95). Barker is, of course, the *enfant terrible* of horror fiction, the author of the *Books of Blood,* and the director of the film *Hellraiser.* His second novel is an epic fantasy, quite unlike most epic fantasies with its almost Peakeian mixture of the familiar and the strange. The setting is contemporary England, but the characters soon fall into a magic world hidden in an Oriental carpet. The real and the "unreal" mix, often hideously. Barker's talent at horror shows in his convincing depiction of evil, something many fantasy writers seem to take for granted. Evil, Barker knows, isn't something that oozes like molas-

ses. It is a corruption of the soul.

Weaveworld is not thematically complex, but it is a mature and vivid work, and the writer's sheer storytelling ability never lets interest flag, even in so long a book (789 pp. in the uncorrected proof).

The Urth of the New Sun by Gene Wolfe (Tor Books, 1987, 372 pp., $17.95). The sequel to and completion of *The Book of the New Sun*, right on the borderline between fantasy and science fiction since it takes place in the future and involves magic that may be explicable as sufficiently advanced science, but the ultimate direction of the series is back into myth. Severian, Autarch of Earth, ventures into space so that the world may be redeemed, as already foretold in the mythology of Wolfe's "antique" future.

The Incorporated Knight by L. Sprague de Camp and Catherine Crook de Camp (Phantasia Press, 191 pp., trade edition, $17.00; limited edition, $40.00). Much more lightweight than the foregoing, but told with the classic de-Campian wit, applying 20th-century common sense to standard fantasy situations. Eudoric, an aspiring knight, kills a dragon, but is run in by the game warden for hunting out of season, and finds himself reduced to such decidedly unknightly extremes as going into business to make ends meet.

The Warrior Who Carried Life by Geoff Ryman (Bantam, 1987, 198 pp., $2.95). Ryman is a new and extraordinary talent, winner of the World Fantasy Award for his novella "The Unconquered Country" (also available from Bantam). This vivid, sometimes brutal tale is his first novel. Like Barker, he is a writer with no patience for fantasy-genre conventions.

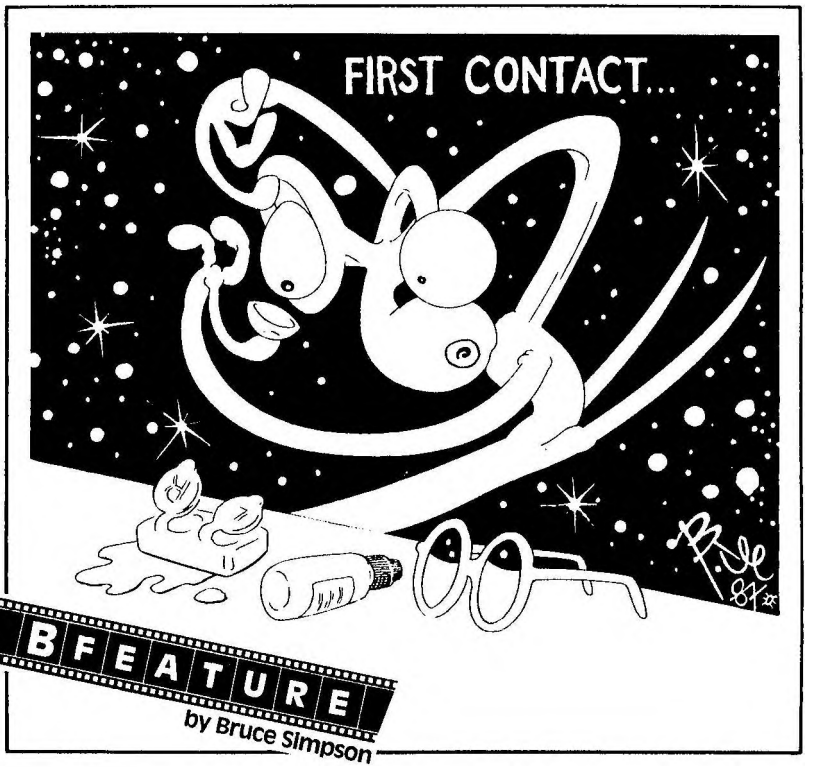
And a couple of underappreciated older books:

The Land of Laughs by Jonathan Carroll (Viking, 1980; Ace, 1983). No elves and cute things in this one; its fairy-tale elements are ultimately sinister as a dead fantasy-writer's daughter manipulates his ultimate fan to write the definitive biography — which will bring her father back to life. Carroll understands the power of fantasy, and he knows the secret pathways into the soul. Had Philip K. Dick and Franz Kafka collaborated to write the work of L. Frank Baum, it would have come out like this. Carroll is an awesomely good writer. Look for his later novel, *The Voice of Our Shadow* (Viking, 1982), and his forthcoming *Bones of the Moon* (Arbor House, 1988).

The Complete Fursey by Mervyn Wall (Wolfhound Press, 68 Mountjoy Square, Dublin 1, Ireland; 1985, 475 pp., American price uncertain). Here's one Lin Carter missed. Mervyn Wall wrote two brilliant fantasy novels back in the 1940s, *The Unfortunate Fursey* and *The Return of Fursey*, which have, incredibly, never been reprinted in the United States. They are among the very best the fantasy field has to offer, witty, wise, richly inventive tragicomedies about a lay brother in an Irish monastery who accidentally becomes a sorcerer but remains ineptly virtuous until hounded by the Church, whereupon he turns to wickedness, only to find he can't manage that either. Along the way he encounters a vast array of ghosts, witches,

demons, a cross-eyed basilisk, and Satan himself. The sorcerers' convention in *The Return of Fursey* is one of the funniest scenes in all fantastic literature. Not to be missed. But reading Mervyn Wall puts a certain burden on you: it's as if you were the only one who knew about *The Sword in the Stone.* You *have* to tell people. He is that good.

In the U.S. this book can probably be found in Irish-import shops in the larger cities. Some enterprising fantasy bookseller would do well to stock it.



THE DEFENDERS OF THE GOLDEN TOWER

by Daniel Pearlman

art: Senre

Daniel Pearlman is a tenured professor of English at the University of Rhode Island. He has taught in New York, New Jersey, Arizona, and Idaho. He lived for three years in Spain, where he taught English literature at the University of Seville for one year and wrote a couple of novels the other two. He has also just finished a novel about the Spanish Civil War, Black Flames.

Most of his shorter fiction in recent years, however, has been science fiction. (His idol in the short SF fiction form is Stanislaw Lem.) Recent story sales include "The Final Dream" (a novelette, Capra Press, 1988), "Another Brush with the Fuzz" (short story, Semiotext(e) *Anthology of SF, eds. Rudy Rucker and Pete L. Wilson, 1988), and "Taking from the Top" (novelette,* Synergy, *vol. 2, edited by George Zebrowski, 1988).*

The Engineering Department of the University of Seville was sponsoring a lecture by the American astrophysicist Everett Nilson on the colonization of a habitable planet that orbited a star called Tau Ceti, about twelve light-years from Earth. Don Luis de Ribera, the Count of Angulu, sat front and center in rapt attention and dismissed all thoughts of what the gossip columnists would hint about *El Conde*'s rubbing shoulders with the riffraff or *El Conde*'s being driven by the insatiable ghosts of his conquistador lineage to contemplate the despoilment of yet another New World. Don Luis had always an *afición* for things of the mind — literature, the arts, astronomy, philosophy, music — and he would not deny that strains of the *New World Symphony* did occasionally drift through his mind as he took in each accented syllable of the very correct Castilian spoken by the erudite American.

The lecturer's explanation of the effects of time dilation was somewhat obscure, but not so the concrete example he gave of himself. Dr. Nilson looked under thirty but claimed to have been born over fifty years ago. He was a member, so he claimed, of the first manned expedition to Tau Ceti, which had left about twenty-five years ago — achieving a cruising velocity of bare thousandths of a percentage point below the speed of light — and he had returned only recently, decades having passed on Earth during his absence whereas he had himself experienced, both mentally and physically, slightly more than six months of ship-time. Only six months of aging while the Earth had aged twenty-odd years! How extraordinary! thought Don

Luis. Of course, Seville had not changed much either during those decades of his absence, joked Dr. Nilson, and he had come back to this beloved city of his travels (a sprinkle of applause), a city where time snores (a few strained chuckles), to re-establish contact with a familiar landmark that would always resist the ravages of historical change (further chauvinistic applause). Toward the end of his talk Dr. Nilson voiced the hope that there were people around the world, people of vision and daring, true individualists, who would wish to participate in future expeditions to Tau Ceti. "Will they keep my job for me till I get back?" someone shouted. "To get rid of such a fool they'll pay your travel expenses!" came the reply. A slight scuffle ensued. The Count of Angulu did not deign to turn his head.

Don Luis de Ribera issued an invitation through Don Ramón Iribarne, rector of the university, requesting the pleasure of Professor Nilson's distinguished presence at a modest dinner at the Palacio Angulu at nine in the evening of the following day. Whenever he was in town, which was less and less often, Don Luis sought out the dinner companionship of whatever interesting foreigner might be passing through Seville. He invited no one else to the palacio for dinner, not relatives, not friends. Friends he could see — as much as he could stand of them — at his club. Relatives invited *him*, especially the younger ones, whose lips dripped oil to his face and whose tongues spat venom behind him. What they wanted was to use him for an *enchufe*, for a "plug" to connect them with Don Fulano to get them in on the ground floor of some housing deal or to put a word in with Don Mengano to get an imbecile cousin a prestigious job in a local branch of a firm based in Madrid. He did what he could, of course — which was far less than they thought he could. They hated him and envied him. He saw them only when necessary — on the most formal of life's occasions. They bored him.

As for his cronies at the club, they constituted the leaders of the mere handful of noble families of the city who, with the Angulu, had for centuries been the unquestioned standard-bearers of the moral and spiritual ideals of Seville and indeed of Spain as a whole. And that, for Don Luis, was the problem. The social circle in which he could move without restriction was so tiny — a little cage stuffed with lions who sniffed each other's filth and perpetually growled behind each other's backs — that he suffered from claustrophobia whenever he returned from abroad to dwell in the city that was his heart, blood, and bones. Having nothing else to do but die of boredom in the odor of obligatory sanctity, his peers passed their excessive recreational time in monitoring each other's behavior according to a nonexistent set of norms that grew ever loftier as they all grew older and crankier. When Doña Francisca was alive, his blessed wife of some thirty years, not a breath of scandal had been breathed across the threshold of the palacio from without or from within. Like his one son, Joselito (now in interplanetary venture-capital dealings in London), he had always been discreet in his private affairs, and his friends looked the other way — as they expected him to


Serre
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do in return. But now that he was alone and cared for only by servants, even an innocent conversation by *El Conde* with a woman of the lower nobility caused brows to arch and tongues to cluck. No wonder that his travels to foreign countries, more for the relief they afforded than for the pleasure, were becoming so much more burdensomely frequent and protracted. He would much rather spend time strolling the leaf-arbored walkways or the befountained and bestatued lanes and *glorietas* of Seville's incomparable Parque María Luisa, but the inevitable result of such spontaneous idlings was a call from an outraged dowager aunt whose servants had it from the servants of a friend that *El Conde* had been discovered cruising the lovers' lanes of the lower classes of the city. *¡Que barbaridad!*

One of the pleasures for Don Luis in inviting cultured foreigners for dinner was their impromptu expressions of delight at the many things of beauty tucked away in alcove, niche, corridor, and garden of the centuries-old palacio. He would glow with pride and see things too as if for the first time: the Zurbarán hanging back between the heavy silver candelabra, the haunted-looking Ribera in its thick gilt frame above the Carrara marble top of the sideboard, the thick and elaborately carved baroque wooden mantel bulging with cupids and flowers around the great hearth. The dinner his servants would prepare would be contrastingly simple — broiled fish, some vegetables, but always with an exquisite touch like truffles rushed in that day from one of his *fincas* to the south, and always a vintage Rioja from his private *cuevas*. If only he could enjoy these glories of his heritage, he sighed inwardly, without paying the price of all the envy and cackling that haunted him in his very own house.

"I may not have followed the mathematics very well, Doctor Nilson, but I understood you to say that a trip that took twenty-five years, as measured by earthly calendars, added little more than six months to your age."

"Absolutely," said the athletic-looking, blond-haired American. "By the way, this is excellent *fino*." He sipped his after-dinner sherry appreciatively.

"It is private stock," Don Luis said proudly, "from my own vineyards in Jérez."

"I hope you realize," said the scientist, swirling the amber liquor in his wineglass, "that my calling for people of vision to help in the task of colonization was addressed quite seriously . . . to people like yourself."

"I am flattered, Professor Nilson, but I cannot imagine how an aging dilettante such as I could contribute to the noble effort of building another New World."

"Very easily," said the American. "By coming along for the ride."

Don Luis laughed, but felt a pang in his heart as he did so.

"I am looking for individuals of extremely independent character who are relatively free, emotionally, from binding attachments to family and friends. These people must be willing to travel literally into the future, as I have done, and then to return here, to an unpredictably changed world, few of

whose inhabitants may even remember them."

"Why should you want them to return?" asked Don Luis. "Why don't you just empty prisons of their convicts and deposit them in your New World as its first colonists?"

It was Nilson's turn to laugh. "We have a long way to go before we begin colonization on any massive scale. Right now we are planning to send out a series of cargo liners to transport the materials needed to build the infrastructure of the new civilization that is to follow. Frankly, Don Luis, this is an extremely expensive operation, and it is being financed almost entirely through private capital. We are seeking wealthy passengers who will invest in our enterprise and receive, on their return, an enormous guaranteed profit on their investment."

To Don Luis this all sounded too good to be true. Barking at his servants to stay out of view for the rest of the evening, he leaned over the onyx coffee table and refilled their two glasses himself. A flurry of wild emotions agitated his breast. Could he get along in a future devoid of Don Alonso de Molina, the Duke of Alcalá, who played chess with him at the club and who fell into a profound stupor, announced by a chain-rattling snore, whenever he was at the point of being beaten? And what about that great whoremaster and patron of the arts Don Pepe de Pelayo y Menendez, Marquis of Tarifa, who on the pretense of discussing the latest exhibition at the Bellas Artes would come over to him and eventually inquire, with a sly wink and a nudge of the elbow, about the "health" of Don Luis's new servant girl from the country? Bores! A couple of bores! And he must not leave out Don José María de Arriaga y Cagal, el conde del Valle, who could talk of nothing else but the last splendid *faena* in the bullring of the Maestranza of his latest *torero*-protégé from the sticks, even though no one of taste cared anymore for the sport since the substitution of tauroids for the real animal nearly thirty years ago. A galloping bore and a pervert to boot! And then there was Don Hernando Rodriguez, saint and sole guardian of Spanish Christendom. . . .

"And just what is it that you require by way of an investment?" Don Luis politely inquired.

"Considering the return on the investment, a mere trifle," said Nilson, waving at the air.

"Exactly how large a trifle?"

"Five million dollars. We will have accommodations for twenty paying passengers at five million each."

"Five million?" gulped Don Luis. He must forget about such silly fantasies. Who had even a tiny fraction of such a sum lying around in liquid assets? This professor may have been an astrophysical genius, but he was also a financial idiot. "My wealth, Professor, unfortunately does not exist in the form of gold bullion. I have rents, properties, investments, farms, lands, *latifundia.* Do you think I would sell my lands for the sake of . . . mere scientific curiosity?"

"Of course not. It would be counterproductive to sell your properties. All you need to do, Don Luis, is to *mortgage* your properties."

"And this is what you call an investment?"

"Think, Señor! How much revenue do your rents and lands and properties bring in on an annual basis? Now multiply that by twenty-five. In your six months of absence you will have garnered twenty-five years of revenue — at compound interest! Now do you see that your five million will double itself, even triple itself by the time you return?"

It was an astounding thought! This American was not such a fool after all. Don Luis made some quick mental calculations and saw that even without compound interest his revenues, after repayment of the mortgages, should nearly triple his initial outlay. His vineyards, his cattle ranches, his houses in New Heliopolis — he would have them all when he got back, and so much more! "Tell me more about this Tau Ceti," Don Luis urged.

"It is a G8 star, not too dissimilar to our own Sun," said Nilson. "It had always seemed one of the most likely of the nearer stars to have a life-supporting planet. On investigation it has turned out to fulfill our wildest dreams. Its fourth planet has an oxygen-rich atmosphere and is only slightly hotter than the Earth. Life forms abound similar to those that inhabited our own planet several million years ago."

Don Luis drifted off into reverie as Professor Nilson spoke on. Would very much have changed, he wondered, by the time he got back? A cold wind suddenly sliced at his groin. And was it always so terrible to play chess with Don Alonso? And did not Don Pepe say something intelligent once about a painting? Wasn't even Saint Hernando Rodriguez sometimes good for a laugh?

". . . and antigee tablets are nonallergenic and insure against physical stress, so that anyone in average physical condition can be sure of a comfortable journey," the professor was saying. "Although space will be at a premium, each passenger will have a private room, and there will be common recreational and dining facilities. . . ."

Don Luis felt twinges of hesitation, but the more he contemplated a New Seville, a Seville cleansed of mocking eyes and wagging tongues, a Seville he could roam about in in unselfconscious abandon, the more receptive he became to the dream this American was spinning. At the end of the evening Don Luis asked if he could see him again soon. Professor Nilson said he would be delighted, that he would be staying in Seville another three weeks, and that the next flight to Tau Ceti was scheduled for a lunar liftoff in approximately six months.

At four o'clock the following afternoon Don Luis was enjoying his usual *cafelito* at the club, sitting next to a wall-length window from which he could look down to the right at the white yachts tethered to the dock, and then across the Guadalquivir and to the left, where the newly replated golden

flanks of the Torre de Oro blazed in the sun. A brief rain had just washed the earth, and the city looked fresh and clean, but then he heard the voices of Don Pepe and Don Alonso, who seemed exceptionally full of good humor and asked if they could sit with him. After exchanging a few pleasantries, they were joined by the beatific Don Hernando Rodriguez and the aficionado of the *toreros* Don José María de Arriaga y Cagal, who pulled up chairs next to the heavy lacquered wood-and-metal table.

"Forgive us if we intrude upon your meditations," grinned the ethereal Don Hernando. "Is it the earth we find you contemplating, Don Luis, or the heavens?"

"Surely, Don Hernando," countered Don Luis, "my eyes must have been fixed upon the earth. The heavens, as everyone knows, are *your* domain, and I would no sooner be caught gazing at them than peeking up the skirts of a dear friend's mistress."

An outburst of guffaws wiped the grin from Don Hernando's thin and trembling lips. "Your metaphorical abilities, Don Luis, far outstrip your sense of moral propriety."

The tall, gaunt Don Alonso, smiling as if about to make a brilliant move at chess, cautioned the two combatants to relax, while Don Luis secretly fumed at Don Hernando's holier-than-thou presumptuousness. Such purity as yours, he wanted to say, makes me pity your virgin martyr of a wife, who was finally driven to wandering about the streets uttering vile obscenities until she at last had to be committed to the *manicomio.* Even now you are the joke of Seville, you impotent fool!

"I am sure," said Don Pepe, "that Don Luis was gazing far *beyond* the skirts of heaven and into the bedroom window of another star. Is that not true, Luis? We hear that you were so entranced by the American professor that you had to be poked by a *custodio* to leave the hall after the lecture was over."

"I have seen *you* so entranced by a painting, Don Pepe," Don Luis rejoined. "Was that not the same night, rumor has it, you were locked in the Bellas Artes until they let you out in the morning?" This was a not-so-subtle allusion to Don Pepe's habit of sneaking through the bedroom windows of the bordellos of which he owned so many outside the Macarena district so that his wife eventually moved off with some mysterious ailment to a sanatorium in France, to the eternal shame — and probably relief — of the Marquis of Tarifa.

The great-bellied Don Pepe of the razor-thin mustache tapped his fingertips together studiedly before replying. "Earth-bound Spaniard that I am," he intoned, "I am indeed enraptured by the beautiful products that still manage to spring from the loins of our ancient culture. Your American scientist, however, is a typical product of his rootless nomadic society, a man who can disappear for twenty-five years at a stretch and not miss a thing." There was a general murmur of agreement.

"For one so chauvinistically critical," said Don Luis, "you seem to know a good deal about the lecture, Don Pepe."

"There is an advantage to reading reports of such unpromising events in the cultural pages of the *ABC*," replied the marquis. "If one is bored, one is not trapped into staying for the whole dreary performance."

"Boredom comes from the jaded spirit within," said Don Luis. "As for me, I have an insatiable curiosity about the things of this world — and of new worlds as well."

"You would do well to have equal curiosity about the *next* world," fluted Don Hernando Rodriguez.

"Amen," said Don Luis.

"Tell us more about this unspoiled New World that revolves about this star, Don Luis," asked Don José María, the Count of Valle, nudging with his elbow Don Pepe who sat to his left. "Is there a Garden of Eden in this New World paradise — where you can wander innocently down the shady lanes and pick the flowers, as in the Parque María Luisa?"

"Yes, there is," replied Don Luis, enraged by the half-swallowed smiles that broke out on the faces of all but the beatified Don Hernando, who was too stupid to catch the innuendo. "But there is as yet no bullring, Don José. It is still a world entirely without culture."

The hollow-cheeked Don Alonso of the cavernous eyes, who sat directly across from Don Luis, slapped the sturdy table with both hands. "Enough! Not one of you is fit to be called *caballero*," he growled in disgust.

"Just listen to our model *caballero*!" snickered the perfumed Don José. "I have heard from Don Enrique, your own parish priest, how you deal out such a swift hand of cards that the aces sometimes stick to your fingers."

Don Alonso turned crimson, not only at this allusion to his irresistible urge to cheat at games — to which Don Luis could well attest — but to the notorious rumor that he was occasionally seen to palm the very money he appeared to be depositing in the collection plate at church.

"You can speak of swift hands, Don José," muttered the cadaverous Don Alonso, "because you are an expert in that field. The waiters at El Rincón have told me of your own manual dexterity at the table."

Don Luis could hardly believe that Don Alonso would go so far in his anger as to hint so boldly at Don José's reputation for pinching the bottoms of waiters. Don José turned pale and lapsed into a haughty silence, sipping without pleasure at his sherry.

An awkward and protracted silence had settled like a pall over the table when the saintly Don Hernando, reacting somewhat tardily to this recent exchange of compliments, clucked in ominous disapproval at Don Alonso. "You can go to Hell, you know," admonished Don Hernando, "for cheating at cards with a priest."

Don Luis was fed up. They were like a band of sharks forever sniffing for blood. There was nothing he could do without being criticized, sniped at,

and ridiculed for the rest of his days. Paradoxically, it was a good thing he had come to the club this afternoon. If he had nursed any remaining doubt about a trip to Tau Ceti, his friends had helped to dispel it. His mind was made up. He would get in touch with Professor Nilson that very night.

It did not take Don Luis long to arrange the loans he needed. He dealt with several banks so as to minimize possible rumors that something outlandish was taking place, and the managers of his various properties were made responsible for maintaining the schedules for repayment of the loans. A law firm in Madrid with no ties to the upper classes of Seville was given overall charge of his affairs during what he described as a protracted absence, and they further agreed to send yearly communications from him — all of which he wrote out and signed in advance, of course — to his son in London (or wherever in the future he might be) on his son's name-day. His servants were to be supervised by an inspector sent out occasionally by his lawyers in Madrid, but they were to vacate the palacio — if they hadn't already done so for any number of reasons — shortly before his scheduled return, and a new set of servants unconnected to the old were to be installed in their places.

His private affairs settled, Don Luis set off first for London to visit his son, whom he hadn't seen in person for ten years. Visiting Joselito proved emotionally wrenching. As much as he would have liked to, he dared not let his son know his plans. Children are the most inflexible moralists in their treatment of their parents, and Don Luis did not wish to be stigmatized by his son as "unnatural." The visit almost caused him to scrap the whole adventure, but his courage returned when he pictured in detail, as a regular spiritual exercise, what it would be like to live out the dreary "natural" alternative. Leaving London, he spent the following few months in the United States, where he made a thorough investigation of Professor Nilson and the Tau Ceti project before plunking his money down for the ride.

"I must be assured of absolute confidentiality," Don Luis demanded when making final arrangements in the office of the scientist. "No one must know that I shall be boarding your ship."

"Guaranteed," said Nilson. "Not even the crew members know *who* the passengers will be. They know only that there will be twenty of you. Ten men and ten women, as it turns out. We have planned things for your maximum social convenience, Don Luis."

"Ten men and ten women? How interesting!" said Don Luis, admiring the symmetry. "And have we been genetically paired like the animals in Noah's Ark?"

"I can say no more than what I've already told you."

"Not even a hint as to whom I am paired with?"

"Absolute confidentiality, remember, Don Luis? Your identity will be protected until the moment you board the ship. Even better, since you will

be boarding on Luna in a spacesuit, no one will see your face until hours after liftoff, when you will finally be permitted to leave your acceleration pad — your bed, of course — and remove your suit and join everyone for a party in the lounge."

Don Luis felt satisfied with the arrangements made for secrecy. If anything, he was amazed at the *thoroughness* of the arrangements. The precautions seemed even unnecessarily elaborate. But such was the way these Americans operated. For a moment, however, a dreadful thought entered Don Luis's head. What guarantee was there that he would be allowed to return? Many such second thoughts had assailed him during the past few months. To admit them to the professor would be a confession of cowardice. He did permit himself to make one other inquiry, though:

"Will you be coming with us, Professor?"

"Yes. I and most of the crew will remain on Nova Terra for six months, helping build the infrastructure. We'll be returning then on the next ship to arrive with paying passengers like yourself. You yourself will be staying on Nova Terra for only two weeks. Good luck, Don Luis. You have your instructions till liftoff. I look forward to having a most enjoyable one-way journey with all of you."

As the elevator rose from level to level of the gantry to the boarding platform, Don Luis glanced at everyone around him. He could not see faces behind the dark-tinted visors, but he could see that some suits tended to be smaller and others larger so that he could roughly distinguish women from men, and he could also see the insignia that identified the members of the crew. The lunar night was cold and stark, and the stars were as numberless as snowflakes. He could not wait to be on board, huddled in his private chamber, out of sight of the great host of faceless stars. It was not going to be easy, however, to be so long parted from his beloved city. How long would it be, he wondered, before he could again enjoy his *cafelito* and gaze across the dark green waters of the Guadalquivir at the Tower of Gold? Another six months? Twenty-five years? The nature of Time seemed so slippery, so treacherous.

He was being herded now across the platform, in the glare of floodlights, toward the great yawning mouth in the side of the ship. Could he turn back? Even now? And lose five million dollars? Be sensible, Don Luis! And yet, he reflected, losing the money would be the least of it. Worst of all was that he would look like an absolute fool! He would utterly lose *face.* When people found out, as they were sure to, all of Seville would be laughing, until the day he died, at *El Conde* the Imbecile who lost both nerve and money and let himself be diddled chasing a star.

Don Luis felt relatively comfortable during liftoff and the ensuing acceleration. The antigee tablet taken at precisely one hour before blastoff was a powerful muscular roborant and vasodistensor. Strapped to his pad, he

gazed through his visor at the quickly receding Earth and Moon in the viewer above his head. The qualms he had had before were now replaced by a feeling of exhilaration. When he returned, he knew, there would still be the park, and still be the club, and the palacio, and the Tower of Gold glinting in the sunlight. But for him it would all be fresh, a New World cleansed of social pollution, and he would walk in it — yes, in a short-sleeved American shirt! — wherever he damn-well pleased and in total self-forgetfulness. Here he was, far up above them all, wielding time like a broomstick, sweeping away the whole lot of them! Bah!

Soon a friendly female voice signaled that it was safe to remove his spacesuit and join the others in the lounge for a toast. After confinement in the suit, his small cabin felt relatively roomy. Even though Nilson had suggested otherwise, he had dressed somewhat formally for the coming introductions. Don Luis decided to wait a while and let the others assemble in the lounge before making his appearance. He passed the time exploring the conveniences of his cabin, which had all been demonstrated before in a series of orientation sessions. There was the leisure-activities console that stored a million books and a hundred thousand holodramas. There was the foldout exercycle and health center. And there was the snackdrop with its huge international menu. Finally, he felt ready. Straightening his tie and brushing at nonexistent dandruff on his jacket sleeves, Don Luis left his chamber and took the stairs that spiraled down toward the common rooms.

When he entered the softly lit lounge, whose viewports were studded with stars, Don Luis stopped at the door to let his eyes grow used to the light and his ears to the pleasant tinkle of glasses and voices coming from the curved bar to his left and the tables spaced about the floor.

By the time he saw Don Alonso, the duke had already been staring at him for several seconds. Don Luis recoiled from the doorway, but then strode forward and looked wildly about for Professor Nilson.

"Come sit down, Don Luis!" said Don Alonso, beckoning him to his table. "I'll pour you a *fino.* You should like it. It's from your own vineyards."

The blood sang in Don Luis's ears as he stiffened with pride and fury.

"Come on," invited the duke. "Forget about bothering the American. It's too late to turn back. I've already inquired."

Don Luis kept staring at him as if hoping the delusion would soon go away.

"You're doing very well, Don Luis. Come sit down for a game of chess. I must say, you're doing much better than Don Hernando. The poor saint blacked out when he caught sight of me. They've taken him back to his room."

"Don Hernando, too?" Don Luis supported himself against the sides of the entranceway as the blood seemed to drain from his head.

"He is not very flexible when it comes to the unexpected. It is his dog-

matic mind-set. How do you think *I* felt when I came into the lounge, like you now, and bumped into Don Pepe? Surprised? To say the least. Pissed? Beyond belief. But I do not easily faint."

"Liar! Impossible!" cried Don Luis, staggering the few feet to Don Alonso's table and collapsing into a seat.

"Don Pepe has always been impossible," sniffed Don Alonso. "See him over there chatting in broken English to that American lady at the bar? I think he is still hoping, like you, that I will evaporate. He's even more of a snob than you, Don Luis. Wait. If he won't join us, I'll get someone else. Don José!" he shouted.

Don Luis felt his lower lip at the mercy of an uncontrollable twitch. Looking around, he saw the plump, tuxedoed Don José among a group of casually dressed young crewmen. Don José, on recognizing him, seemed to turn pale.

"I shall demand my money back," said Don Luis. "I was promised absolute confidentiality!"

"And that is exactly what you received," said Don Alonso, sliding him his drink. "The American is utterly ecstatic. He is sure we must be thrilled to find ourselves together like this."

"I was absolutely discreet!" Don Luis murmured plaintively.

"So was I. Relax. Play chess," said Don Alonso, advancing a crystal pawn over the chessboard inlaid in the tabletop. "Fate pins us together. I accept that," sighed Don Alonso. "I am disturbed, however, by one thing, Don Luis."

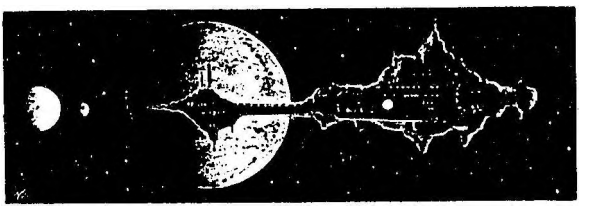
"What thing, Don Alonso?"

"What sentinels remain now down below to guard the parapets and towers of Culture?"

Don Luis shrugged his shoulders. "I assumed that all of *you* would be —"

"So did I!" snapped Don Alonso. "I am extremely disappointed. I accept the fact that not one of you is a decent human being, but I expected you at least to fulfill your civic responsibilities."

Don Luis nodded with solemnity and reached out for the *fino* that the Duke of Alcalá had poured for him. Don Alonso was right. What obstacle was there now to withstand the total barbarization of Seville? Don Luis shook his head and felt profoundly ashamed.



SUGAR DADDY
by Bradley Denton
art: Brad W. Foster

Bradley Denton's first professional SF sale was to The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction *in 1984; subsequently, he was a final-ballot nominee for the 1985 John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer. His first novel,* Wrack and Roll, *was published in November 1986 by Popular Library/Questar.*

He and his "infinitely patient and beautiful wife," Barbara, live near Lawrence, Kansas.

Steffan stood pressed into a corner of the apartment, clutching his soul-painting rig in his crossed arms. He was afraid that if he put it down, Cassie would crush it.

"You went behind my back," she said, zipping her duffel. "We agreed two months ago that Daddy Rieger's Competition was dirty air, and now you're sucking up his fagging cash." She picked up the duffel and walked to the door, then paused with her hand half-raised to touch the jamb. "How could you, while we were working on our showing — *our* showing — together?" She looked back at him with eyes that lased into his soul.

A screw on the base of the briefcase-sized rig began digging into Steffan's breastbone. "I wanted to let my work speak for itself. You can understand that, can't you?"

"I understand that all we've done in the past year has been roach shit to you."

"That isn't true. If I hadn't won —" But he *had* won. "You see that I have to remove my pieces now, don't you? I mean, the gallery isn't . . ."

"You've always been too good for the gallery, haven't you? You've always been too good for the places that have kept the art alive for three decades."

"Cass, that isn't —"

"I've known all along that you felt that way, Steff. What I didn't know was that you were a Spiker."

Steffan felt as though hot lead had been poured down his spine. "I'm not."

"Why else would you crawl onto the mat with Daddy Rieger?"

He took a step toward her. "Stop calling him that. He's just an old man trying to give something back to what made him great."

"The art didn't make him great," Cassie said. "Spike did. Psilo and upper rolled into a brain-burn lozenge. Now, twenty years later, having made his fortune and fagged-up the lives of thousands —"

She looked away and began speaking in verse:

"Old Daddy Rieger
Went out to the freezer
To get a poor kitten a fish.
But when it was cooked
And Spike had him shook,
The meal went on Daddy's own dish."

The screw digging into Steffan's breastbone felt blue-hot. Hadn't he only done what he'd had to do? To hide his art in a Kansas City gallery was the equivalent of closet masturbation. Soul-painting deserved better; it deserved to be seen and felt by all who were able to see and feel.

And if that took money, and Hammond Rieger was willing to provide it . . .

"Don't go," he said.

Cassie shook her head, her dark blonde hair brushing across her white collar. "You've got what they used to call a sugar daddy," she said, "so you don't need me anymore."

She thumbed the jamb, and the door slid open, squeaking in its worn tracks.

"Don't you want your rig?" Steffan asked.

"It's at the gallery," Cassie said, stepping out.

The door closed.

Steffan set up his rig on the low table in the center of the apartment and sat cross-legged before it. The old fifteen-centimeter holocylinder and the keyboard/EEG unit with its four slender wires were ready in less than a minute, and it took only a few more seconds to attach the clips at the ends of the wires to the copper nubs at his temples and behind his ears.

I'll be able to buy a wireless rig now, he thought. *One with cephcaps.*

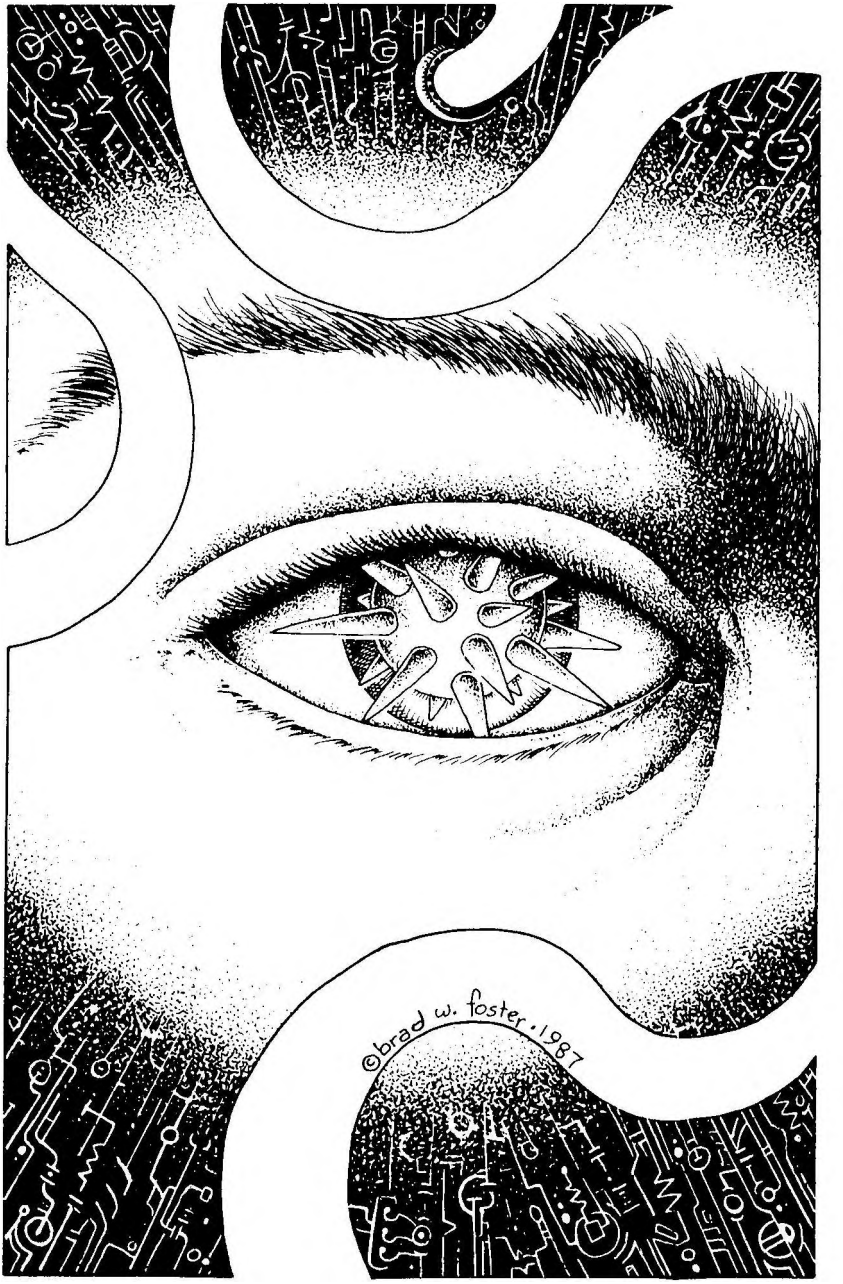
The monitor became frantic with four spastic lines, and Steffan's work-in-progress, *The Sirens and Odysseus,* shimmered into being inside the cylinder. Scudding clouds, sea spray, and the outlines of two women were just visible through myriad speckles of noise.

Steffan began chanting his mantra to stabilize his EEG, but his usual repetition of "beauty is truth; truth, beauty" failed to clear the noise. A crackling sound intruded, preventing him from applying himself to the task.

At last he realized what it was, and reached into a pocket to remove the folded sheet of paper.

He couldn't resist reading the letter again to prove that it was real:

AlphaCore Limited
An Enlightenment Corporation
04 May/09:34 A.M.


©brad w. foster·1987

Dear Mr. Shorham:

Your portfolio of soul-painting software, "Images of Myth and Magic," has won the Grand Prize in the New Discoveries in the Electroencephalic Arts Competition. Our judges were unanimous in their praise of your work, and the competition sponsor, Hammond L. Rieger, is similarly impressed.

As you are currently without mailnet service, we are sending this notification via courier. We therefore request that you contact competition headquarters at (ComNet) 1-212-334-5906-75849 immediately upon receipt.

This Grand Prize consists of a cash award of $45,000 U.S. and a handsome trophy designed by Mr. Rieger. These will be presented in a ceremony to be held on May 20 at the Grand Span Hotel in San Francisco, California. (Please note that the cash component is available immediately.)

Congratulations! I look forward to meeting you.

Sincerely,
Helena S. Corwin,
Competition Coordinator

Steffan knew he would miss Cassie, but as he reread the letter, he also knew that he could have no lasting regrets. His art was the center of his life, and he wanted — *needed* — to insure its success. If Cassie couldn't accept that, there was nothing he could do about it.

Maybe she would come back when her envy had worn off.

Steffan set the letter aside and began his mantra again. Before long, he had established a solid alpha rhythm and was able to manipulate the misty light inside the holocylinder, to clear and shape it with his thoughts.

With his soul.

Helena Corwin had amber eyes and black hair that tumbled over her shoulders like a dark liquid. Her cocoa skin was the same color as her bodysuit. She was tall and large-breasted, almost a throwback to the sex goddesses in the crackly motion pictures Steffan had worshiped as a teenager. He felt like a clumsy lump in her presence.

She was gazing at the two-meter holocylinder that dominated the office. Inside, larger than Steffan had ever seen it before, was his *Minotaur.*

"Marvelous," the woman breathed. "It's so real visually that I'm almost afraid . . ." As her voice faded to a whisper, she snapped two olive-sized black cephcaps onto her temples.

Steffan was surprised. Her hair had hidden the nodes, and he hadn't expected them to be there.

"Incredible," she murmured. "I can feel the strength, the raw blend of

human and bull . . . I can feel what it would be like to be the Minotaur."

Steffan felt his face reddening. "Some soul-painters leave out the tactile, since most audinces don't have implants," he said. "But I always try to do something with it because the most important part of the audience consists of other artists, such as yourself."

Helena Corwin removed the cephcaps and smiled at him. "Oh, I'm not a real soul-painter. I wouldn't want to try, with artists like you around." She brushed her hair back to reveal her right-temple implant. "I had the nodes put in because I'm a connoisseur. Paste-ons don't convey the same depth of sensation, and I wanted to appreciate every nuance of Hammond Rieger's work . . . and now of yours."

"That's wonderful, Ms. Corwin," Steffan said, achingly aware of how stupid he sounded.

The woman walked to a mahogany desk. "Call me Helena. After all, we'll be seeing a lot of each other from now on." She tapped a few keys on the desktop. "There. The prize money is safely in your account."

"I guess that means I can afford my own ticket home."

Helena laughed, her voice sounding like thin silver bells. "AlphaCore will pick up your expenses. In fact, after the banquet tonight, we hope you'll agree to stay here at the compound for a few months. You'll have everything you'll need to pursue your art, and the environment is perfect for a talent such as yours. Besides, as of next week, you have a standing invitation to visit Enlightenment House. Hammond would like to meet you."

"Won't he be at the banquet?" Steffan asked.

Helena gave him another smile. "He's out of the country, but I know he'll want to congratulate his winner as soon as he returns."

"I'd be honored," Steffan said, and wondered if he really would be. The competition was one thing, but he hadn't made up his mind about its sponsor yet.

"Good," Helena said. "There's just one more thing I need to know to prepare for your stay: do you use creative aids, such as Spike?"

Steffan tried to block the mental image of Cassie's angry eyes. "Not usually," he said, his voice cracking.

Helena cocked her head, and her hair flowed to her left shoulder. "You sound nervous. What do they tell you about Spike in the Midwest?"

Steffan's throat felt dry. "That it's psilocybin and amphetamine, and that it hurts the art more than it helps."

Helena sighed. "Why people persist in spreading these lies, I'll never know. Spike is simply a mild encephalogenic facilitator, perfectly legal in this state and in every foreign country except the Soviet Union, that enables one to gain firmer creative control over one's own mind. Hammond Rieger, who first synthesized the substance, called it Spike because of the ease with which users can alter their EEGs — but the media have given that name a connotation of violence, of danger."

"I see," Steffan said.

Helena crossed the room toward him. As she passed the holocylinder, she ran her fingertips over its surface, and the creature inside turned to look at her.

"In any case," Helena said, stopping beside Steffan's chair, "your art is your own, to be created however is best for you, and we hope you'll stay with us as long as you like. You have no reason to return home soon, do you?"

Steffan smelled Helena's perfumed skin as her warm hand closed on his forearm.

He only wished that he could make Cassie's eyes disappear.

The audience at the banquet consisted of five hundred celebrities and politicians. It was as if AlphaCore had plucked up every V.I.P. in California and dropped them all into this huge room with its heavily laden tables and dancing fountains.

It took almost an hour for Steffan to realize that they were all here to see *him*, a young man who was no one special . . . except as an artist.

But the art was a solitary, even lonely, occupation. It didn't seem to have anything to do with the adulation that surrounded him now.

The great soul-painter Filmore Stone presented the trophy: a thirty-centimeter crystal sphere that burned with an internal flame of gold. It was *From Ashes to Glory,* the comeback piece of Hammond L. Rieger.

As Steffan took the sphere from Stone, he felt a great heat shoot up his arms into his heart.

Then the air was split with cheers, and Helena Corwin was hugging him, her breasts pressed against his chest to soothe the place where his old rig had hurt him two weeks before.

Secluded high on a hill, Enlightenment House was the palace that Steffan had expected the creator of Spike to own, but the Hammond Rieger who met him and Helena at the door to the "arboretum" was not the pasty recluse he had imagined. Rieger looked tanned and robust, although his hair was grayer than in the photos.

"So this is our new soul-painter," Rieger said. His voice was like that of a leading man in an ancient Western. "You told me he was young, Helena, but I didn't realize *how* young. Hard to believe a man only twenty-six can create art that speaks of so much experience and feeling."

Rieger pulled Steffan through the doorway, and Steffan was dazzled by bright sunlight.

"Sit, sit!" Rieger's voice boomed. "Make yourself comfortable!"

Steffan was pushed into a soft leather chair. Then, as his eyes adjusted, he saw that the arboretum's ceiling and three of its walls were composed of hexagonal panes of glass. The room was cluttered with small trees around

which several cats prowled, and the sight gave him an unpleasant memory of Cassie's doggerel.

Helena settled into a chair beside him, squeezing his hand, and he forgot about Cassie for the moment.

Rieger lowered himself into a chair facing theirs. "I don't see many people these days," he said, stroking a calico kitten that had jumped onto his lap, "but I was determined to meet you. It would have been a shame if the world had never known of your skills simply because no one bothered to spend the money to present them."

"I'm very grateful," Steffan said.

Rieger waved a hand. "I'm the one who should be grateful. In fact, I'm so impressed with your work that I've decided to hold a second Competition, with *three* Grand Prizes to be awarded two months from now. If there's one of you out there, there may be more, and I want to find them."

Steffan thought of Cassie again, and of a possible way to redeem himself. "I know of some, sir," he said.

"Well, don't tell me their names!" Rieger said. "If you did, yahoos all over the country would claim that you asked me to influence the judges!"

Steffan felt ashamed. He *had* wanted to mention Cassie's name . . . but Rieger was right. He began to be aware of his arms sticking to the chair leather.

"Don't worry, Steff," Helena said. "If the artists you have in mind are even a tenth as good as you, the judges will rank their works high."

"We may even make *you* a judge one of these days, Steff-boy," Rieger said, still stroking the kitten. "For now, though, you have your own work. Which reminds me — AlphaCore would like to fly you and Helena to London next week to open a joint exhibition. Your new work on one side, my old work on the other."

"You mean your *classic* work, Hammond," Helena said.

Rieger grinned and shrugged. "I've done a few new things, too, such as *From Ashes to Glory,* that I'd like to display as well. What do you say, son?"

Steffan was stunned. What *could* he say? "I — I'd be honored, sir," he stammered.

"None of this 'sir' business," Rieger said. "I'm Hammond to my friends. Not Ham, though — makes me feel like a piece of meat."

He laughed loudly, and the kitten tried to jump away.

Rieger caught the animal and brought it up to his cheek. "Where do you think you're going?" he said, chuckling. "I paid good money for you! I *own* you! Why would you want to run from your daddy?"

Steffan felt embarrassed, but supposed that even living legends were allowed to act foolishly over their pets.

Rieger set the kitten on the floor and stood. "Why don't you bring Steffan this way, Helena?" he said, starting across the room. "I have something to show him."

Helena squeezed Steffan's hand again. "This is the surprise I told you about," she whispered.

Steffan didn't remember her mentioning any surprise, but he followed her and Rieger through a doorway that was half-hidden by a potted palm. The light here shifted from sunlight-yellow to pure white, and he felt as though he were stepping through a portal that might take him anywhere in the universe.

In the white room's center stood the biggest electroholographic unit Steffan had ever seen. The cylinder was five meters in diameter and three high, and its surface sparkled like starshine.

"A set of projectors would be more practical," Rieger said, walking to the console and sitting down in one of two white chairs, "but projectors can't produce high-resolution images." The cylinder began to glow with a silvery fluorescence, and vague humanlike shapes appeared inside.

Steffan had the impression that the shapes were tearing glowing chunks of protoplasm from each other and flinging them against the concave wall of their world.

"I'm going to call it *Apocalypse and Rebirth*," Rieger said. "As you can see, though, it's a long way from being finished. I keep finding myself drawn from one portion of the field to another, so no sector is getting quite the attention it deserves."

Steffan sensed that Rieger expected him to comment. "If anyone can do it, sir, I'm sure it's you."

"So am I," Helena said. "The only other artist who might have the necessary skills is Steffan."

Steffan mumbled a modest denial.

"Now, now, none of that," Rieger said. "You wouldn't have won the Competition if you weren't exceptional. That's why I asked you to visit me. You've surely noticed that this rig has a dual console."

Steffan was ashamed to admit that he *hadn't* noticed, so he nodded dumbly.

"What you're probably wondering, though," Rieger said, "is *why*. The answer is that this rig is so complex that it almost *requires* two users. In other words, it gives us the opportunity to do something that has never been done before: to link two minds in order to conjure a single work of art. So if you're willing, I'd like you to join me in the creation of *Apocalypse*."

Helena's hand pressed into the small of Steffan's back, gently pushing him toward the second white chair. Before he had even digested what Rieger had said, he found himself sitting just to the right of the great man.

"You won't regret it, Steff-boy," Rieger said. "Together, we'll create a soul-painting the likes of which have never been seen before."

Steffan stared into the cylinder at a wraith trying to claw its way out to him.

"Of course," Rieger continued, "you'll have to have two more implants before we can actually work together, but you can have that done in London."

Steffan forced his eyes down from the clawing creature and saw that the monitor on his half of the console was marked to display not four, but six EEG bands.

Helena's fingers caressed his head at points high on the skull. "Here and here," she said. "They'll be just like the others, except that you won't have to drain your own bank account this time. Hammond tells me that the difference in control is astonishing."

"You'd better believe it," Rieger said. His voice seemed to be entering Steffan's consciousness through Helena's fingertips. "By the way, son, you *do* use Spike, don't you?"

Steffan shook his head.

Rieger frowned. "It'd be better if you did, because it'd help you match your base alpha rhythm to mine. But we can see how it goes. Fair enough?" There was a finality in his tone that said the interview was over.

Helena helped Steffan up from the chair and put her arm around his waist to walk him out. "I think Steff's a little stunned at how fast things are moving for him," she said.

"London'll do him good," Rieger said. "He'll have a chance to relax and get his thoughts together."

Steffan hoped that was true. Already he was having trouble remembering his life in Kansas City, and what Cassie's face had looked like. . . .

Despite the pressure of Helena's arm, he stopped and looked back at his benefactor.

"Mister Rieger, I —" he began.

"Hammond," Rieger said, waving his hand. The calico kitten appeared and jumped onto his lap again.

Steffan felt dizzy, but there was something he had to ask before surrendering to the feeling. "Hammond," he said, "why would you want to dilute your genius by collaborating with . . . anyone?"

Rieger stroked the kitten. His eyes were lowered, and Steffan couldn't see his face.

"We should be going, Steff," Helena said softly.

"It's all right," Rieger said, looking up. His face was lined in ways that Steffan hadn't noticed before. "My heart is diseased, son, and I'm past the legal transplant age. I could have it done anyway — hell, I could buy every bootleg organ in South America and still have enough left over to emigrate to Mars — but I've chosen not to. I'm tired of this body. In the time remaining, though, I want to create one last, tremendous work, and I can only complete it if you agree to assist me." He paused. "Will you?"

Steffan's dizziness faded. Rieger was a legend, but he was also an old man who needed help. Only a prejudiced bastard would refuse to give it.

"I will," Steffan said.

The image he would retain of that first meeting would be of Hammond Rieger smiling and stroking a kitten, the shadows of his soul-painting floating above him like ghosts in a silver aquarium.

Steffan and Helena made love for the first time while en route to London in an AlphaCore ramjet. He tried Spike because Helena was using it, and was amazed at the intensity and synchronicity that resulted. It felt as if they had become welded together, as if they truly had become one flesh. A blue oval of sky appeared over Helena's head as they came together, and afterward Steffan couldn't help thinking that he had been granted a vision from God.

The week of the Rieger/Shorham exhibition was a blur. Steffan was congratulated, fêted, propositioned, congratulated again, and applauded until the hours and days ran together into a triumphant collage. And in the night, there was Helena.

One evening, she ran her fingers over his scalp from node to node. Each time she touched copper, a wave of pleasure rushed through Steffan's brain like an encephalogenic tsunami.

"Two more," she murmured.

He had the surgery the next morning, feeling only a pair of stings like mosquito bites. Two drops of blood were sponged away with a gauze pad.

That night he used cephcaps to link himself to a soul-painting console, while Helena used wires to plug herself into the output sockets, and he created images of ecstasy for her until they collapsed together. Two of her wires caught on his new implants, but he was too happy to care about the soreness.

Steffan asked Helena to arrange a stop in Kansas City on their way back to California. Once there, he waited until she fell asleep and then took a taxi to the little gallery where he and Cassie had met.

She was there, as he had known she would be. Ever since leaving, he had imagined her in the workroom, slaving at a piece that no one would ever see. Now here she was in left profile, creating a soul-painting that looked like a fetus in the womb.

"Can you spare a moment?" Steffan asked.

Cassie shut down the rig and removed her wires without speaking.

He stepped closer. "I saw your display as I came inside. I like the changes you've made in *Dance of Death.* It has a nice eeriness of expression that wasn't there the last time I saw it."

Cassie's eyes flicked toward him, then away again. "I tried to make it look like you," she said.

Steffan felt as though his lungs had filled with ice water. Could she really hate him so much?

"I'm just back from London," he said.

"I know. The Rieger propaganda machine has been working overtime on you."

Steffan rubbed his eyes. "I didn't come to fight. I came to tell you something."

When he lowered his hands, he saw that Cassie was standing close, her eyes burning at him with the same old angry fire.

"I've got something to tell you, too," she said. "Daddy Rieger is using you just like he used everybody who believed in Spike. He's laughing at you for thinking that he gives a fagging shit about your work."

Steffan wanted to turn and run . . . but he couldn't go without trying to do what he had come for.

"AlphaCore's sponsoring a second Competition," he said. "The announcement'll be made soon, but I wanted to tell you now so you could start thinking about what to submit. You'd only be hurting yourself if you refused to enter this time."

He braced himself for another onslaught of her rage, but it didn't come. Encouraged, he put his hand on her shoulder. "Don't keep your art hidden, Cass. Let other people see it, people who can appreciate it. Please."

Cassie walked out from under his hand and sat at her rig again.

"Maybe," she said, clipping on the wires.

On his way out through the gallery, Steffan paused to study *Dance of Death.* It didn't look like him at all.

Three weeks after the new Competition was announced, Helena took Steffan to Enlightenment House for the second time. They went directly to the arboretum and then to the door behind the palm tree.

The enormous holocylinder in the white room was alive with specters. Rieger was already seated at his half of the console.

"Steff-boy," the old man called. "Are you ready to create a masterpiece?"

Steffan hesitated in the doorway. He hadn't been working lately, and really wanted to begin a piece that would be all his own, but —

"I'm ready to try, sir," he said, walking to the empty chair.

Rieger chuckled. "I told you before; call me Hammond. Now, I think this will work best if you follow me; the groundware is tuned to my own base rhythm, and you'll have to adjust. Once you're comfortable, I'll establish outlines while you concentrate on details. You have a talent for fine work."

Steffan nodded, then snapped a cephcap to each of his six skull nodes. "A project like this could take forever, Hammond."

"It won't come easily, son," Rieger said. "You'll be in me, and I'll be in you, so we'll each need to mesh with the other. We'll have entered a state that no one else has ever experienced. Ready for power?"

Steffan looked over his shoulder, hoping for a smile from Helena, but she was gone.

He bit his lip and turned back to the console.

"Ready," he said.

His doubts disappeared as an electric tingle spread through his brain. It felt almost as good as encephalogenic love with Helena.

Rieger was a rapid spark ahead of him in the convoluted magnetic ocean that was *Apocalypse and Rebirth.* Steffan tried to catch up, to fine-tune the lines of force that would form the soul-painting, but the old master was too fast. Instead of perfecting the work, Steffan found himself crisscrossing lines and twisting shapes until the things in the cylinder were even more amorphous than they had been before.

He was failing.

"Break," Rieger's voice rumbled, and the tickle of power drained away.

Steffan was too humiliated to move. What would Helena think when she learned that he was a fraud, a worthless pretender to the throne that had been prepared for him?

Rieger's tanned, veined hand clasped Steffan's forearm. "Steff-boy, you were dealing with a larger field than you're used to, with six bands instead of four, plus another entity thrown into the equation to boot. You were unsteady, but you stayed with it, and I call that damn good for a first try. Now, go find Helena and have her take you upstairs. I'd like you to stay at Enlightenment House until we're finished."

Steffan removed his cephcaps and stood shakily. According to his watch, four hours had passed since he had entered the white room. No wonder he was exhausted.

Rieger, though, seemed as full of vigor as ever.

I can't even keep up with a dying man, Steffan thought, but said, "I'll do better next time."

"I know you will, son. To be frank, though, one reason you had trouble keeping up was that I took a half-gram of Spike before hooking in. You might give it a try."

Steffan looked into Rieger's eyes and saw only concern. "All right, Hammond."

"Good boy," Rieger said. "Go on, now. I think I'll work a few more hours before bedtime."

Steffan found Helena in the arboretum, and she took him to a bedroom furnished in shades of aqua. He lay on the sunken floatbed and stared at the ceiling.

"I called AlphaCore's screening judge," Helena said. "He says the early entries for the second competition are impressive. Soul-painting is entering its renaissance."

Steffan turned onto his stomach and pushed his face into the bed, wishing that it would burst so he could drown in gelatin. As soon as people saw the work of the second Competition's winners, they would realize how poor his

own pieces had been all along. Hammond Rieger would find another collaborator for *Apocalypse and Rebirth.*

He felt Helena's breath on his ear.

"No one is as good as you," she whispered.

She ran her fingers over his scalp, and he tried to believe her.

Then they took Spike together, and he *did* believe her.

Five weeks later, he was a bronze spark racing through the links of a warrior's chain mail, polishing the metal to a sheen.

Then he was a blast of diamond-sand, scouring the stone beneath the warrior's feet.

Then a bolt of lightning, searing the earth where the Four Horsemen rode.

Then a snake, striking . . .

Then a salve, healing . . .

Then earth . . .

Then fire . . .

Then water . . .

Then air . . .

He was energy, life, love, art.

He followed the Creator, making visible that which was already perfect, Spiking it down.

He sang with soundless joy.

"Fine job, son," Rieger said, stroking his calico kitten. "It's all I can do to stay close to you."

Steffan grinned and turned to gaze into the cylinder. He saw armored men, horses, swords, blood.

"Tomorrow," Rieger said, "we'll begin the *Rebirth* counterpoint. It'll be more difficult, but it'll also make this a masterpiece."

"What will it look like?" Steffan asked, feeling a surge of excitement.

Rieger rubbed the kitten's face against his cheek. "You'll see tomorrow," he said. "Go to Helena now."

Steffan went to the door, then paused to gaze again at what they had made. "If what you have in mind can top *this,* Hammond, then I can hardly wait."

Rieger chuckled, then coughed. "I know," he said when he had regained his breath. "But even with Spike, we need our rest."

Steffan went upstairs to Helena. After they made love, he lay awake for hours, thinking that no matter what his benefactor said, he didn't need rest or anything else. He already had everything.

He wondered briefly whether Cassie had entered the second Competition, then decided that there was no point in dwelling on it. The winners had been announced that morning, and they were all strangers to him.

He was pleased to discover that he didn't envy them, even though each

would receive $60,000. His prize had been smaller, but he had beaten them to it, and now he and Hammond were creating something that would outshine anything that anyone else had ever done.

When he finally did sleep, he dreamed of battle, and victory.

In the morning, Helena went with him to the arboretum and kissed him beneath the palm.

"You're doing a great thing," she said. Her eyes looked moist.

Steffan laughed and pulled away. Helena was too subdued this morning, as if she were still half-asleep. He, on the other hand, had taken a gram of Spike upon awakening, and felt ready to stay hooked into *Apocalypse and Rebirth* until the work was completed.

"I love you both," Helena said.

Steffan stroked her cheek, then went into the white room.

Rieger was already there, petting his kitten. He looked up and frowned as Steffan sat down beside him. "You're late, Steff-boy."

Steffan snapped on his cephcaps. "Sorry, Hammond. Helena kept me longer than usual. I think she feels lonely now that I'm spending so much time with you."

Rieger grunted and snapped on his own caps. "We'll take care of that. We're almost finished." The kitten in his lap began purring.

Steffan thought he knew just how it felt.

The two sparks passed the body of the last fallen soldier and entered a realm where nothing existed save for pockets of turbulence that appeared as swirls of incoherent light. This place was Chaos, and Steffan had come with God to shape it into a world.

Rieger hovered for an instant and then leaped into a swirl, strengthening and clarifying its existence.

Steffan held his own spark back, in awe of the skill of his patron. As he watched, the swirl increased in size and fury and became a whirlpool shot through with brilliant streaks of blue and violet. It was the most magnificent thing he had ever seen.

Then Rieger's spark crossed one of the violet streaks and flickered.

"Steff-boy," a voice said. Rieger was speaking in the world beyond the curved wall of the holocylinder.

"Yes, Hammond," Steffan answered. It was a struggle to form the words, to acknowledge that he still had a body with a mouth and tongue.

"Something's . . . wrong," Rieger said, and Steffan saw that the old man's spark was no longer stirring the lines of force, but being swept along as if it were a bit of electronic flotsam.

Steffan nudged his own spark closer to the edge of the whirlpool. "What is it? Should we break?"

"No . . . come . . . help me."

Steffan hesitated. Then, ashamed of his fear, he plunged into the whirlpool and found himself being pulled deeper and deeper into Chaos.

"Stretch," Rieger whispered. "Join your impulse . . . to mine. . . ."

Steffan concentrated, slowing the frequency and shifting the phase of his base rhythm, and his spark elongated until he felt as though he were a line of force, an integral part of the whirlpool. As he swirled, he came ever closer to the dying flicker that was Hammond Rieger.

"Almost . . ." Rieger breathed. "Together . . . we can . . . break out. . . ."

Steffan stretched farther still —

And they touched.

A spear of hot plasma, orgasmic and agonizing, pierced Steffan's brain. Purple stars burst around him like ripe fruit, and their fire consumed his flesh. He could smell his skin crisping, his hair singeing. He screamed, but heard only the electromagnetic rush of the whirlpool.

"Oh, yes," one of the stars said, and then came the black flood.

Finally, the black brightened to gray, and Steffan became aware of his own spark again.

But Hammond Rieger's was gone.

"Break," Steffan said, his voice a faint rasp.

His vision shifted to the outside world and revealed his six cephcaps in his hands. Then he raised his eyes to look into the cylinder and was horrified to see that *Apocalypse and Rebirth* was fading, its figures dissolving like salt pillars in water.

"Hammond," Steffan said, turning to his left. "What's happening? What's gone —"

Rieger was slumped in his chair, his cephcaps still attached to their skull nodes, his face drained of blood. The kitten in his lap mewed, then jumped to the floor and ran underneath the console.

Steffan pushed himself to his feet and went to Rieger, bending down to press his ear against the old man's chest. He heard nothing, but felt his own heart beginning to race as the enormity of what had happened sank in.

He pulled the body to the floor, and it crumpled as if it were made of sticks and dough. Kneeling beside it, he probed the slack mouth with his fingers, shuddering as they touched the dry tongue and teeth. Then he sealed his own mouth around the lips and tried to breathe life into the dead lungs.

He tried for a long time, pausing only to shout for Helena, who did not come. The kitten beneath the console stared out with frightened yellow eyes.

When he knew that it was hopeless, he grasped a chair arm and pulled himself up again. He took a deep breath, and the air tasted sour.

Rieger looked asleep, dreaming.

Steffan turned toward the cylinder and saw only a pale fog where the greatest work in the history of the art had been. Then he looked away and

walked toward the white door.

After the third step he stopped, amazed. The familiar, delicious tickle had returned, skimming across his brain at first, then digging in, burrowing.

But I'm not hooked up, he thought, swaying. *The caps are off, I'm —*

A jolt like the rush of a hundred grams of Spike slammed him to the floor. As he fell, he twisted and saw that the kitten was standing on Rieger's chest, sniffing at the mouth.

Then all he could think of was that he had to find Helena, and he tried to crawl toward the door.

A second jolt flipped him onto his back, and a voice asked, *Where do you think you're going?*

Steffan's vision clouded, and he saw two sparks joining, becoming one.

He called for Cassie, but there was no sound.

I paid good money for you, the voice said, chuckling.

Steffan whimpered, and then even that was choked off as the voice spoke from his own mouth.

"I *own* you," it said. ✪

CYCLE

(for William Blake)

And did these atoms cling to one
scenario to build a home,
the collision of materials
flowering into human forms?

and did these forms discover love
could multiply and fill the world
so faith and friendship might be born
and cities grow from grains of sand?

and did man learn how to ignite
more than magic when he split
atoms, hiding forbidden fruit
ripe on the core of self-destruct?

— Norman Nathan

BUCK ROGERS IN THE 25TH CENTURY: The 60th Anniversary of a Special SF Hero

HISTORICAL ESSAY

by Ron Goulart

Ron Goulart has been writing science-fiction stories and novels since the 1950s. The past few years, however, he has also been writing about another lifelong interest: cartooning and comics. His works in this area include The Great Comic Book Artists *(St. Martin's Press, 1986) and* Ron Goulart's Great History of Comic Books *(Contemporary, 1986).*

He arrived in our century just as the rip-roaring Jazz Age was ending and just before a grimmer decade of economic depression and increasing war jitters was about to start. He first appeared in a pulp magazine novelette that was only passably written, and shortly thereafter showed up in a comic strip that was only passably drawn. Despite this less than auspicious beginning, Buck Rogers became the best-known science-fiction hero of the century. He gave his name to anything that was considered, up until the advent of the atomic bomb, as the wildest kind of scientific speculation. And it was that "Buck Rogers stuff" that inspired everybody from the creators of comic book superheroes to future astronauts and scientists to Ray Bradbury. Buck Rogers helped introduce the country to the possibilities of the future, and had quite a few wild and woolly adventures while doing so.

Although several people have been credited with inventing him, Buck was actually the creation of a Philadelphia newspaperman named Philip Francis Nowlan. He was forty when he sold his first science-fiction story to Hugo Gernsback's *Amazing Stories*. Titled "Armageddon — 2419 A.D.," it appeared in the August 1928 issue and featured one Anthony Rogers. A twenty-nine-year-old scientific fellow, Rogers had an "interest in radioactive gases," and his company, the American Radioactive Gas Corporation, sent him to investigate some reportedly unusual phenomena in abandoned Pennsylvania coal mines. Trapped by a cave-in, the sole survivor of the exploring party, Rogers was knocked out by the accumulation of radioactive gas. His nap lasted for five centuries, and while he slept, great changes took place in the outside world —

> When I began my long sleep, man had just begun his real conquest of the air in a sudden series of transoceanic flights in airplanes driven by internal combustion motors. He had barely begun to speculate on

> the possibilities of harnessing subatomic forces, and had made no further practical penetration into the field of ethereal pulsations than the primitive radio and television of that day. The United States of America was the most powerful nation in the world, its political, financial, industrial, and scientific influence being supreme. . . . I awoke to find the America I knew a total wreck — to find Americans a hunted race in their own land, hiding in dense forests that covered the shattered and leveled ruins of their once-magnificent cities. . . . World domination was in the hands of the Mongolians, and the center of world power lay in inland China, with Americans one of the few races of mankind unsubdued — and it must be admitted in fairness to the truth, not worth the trouble of subduing in the eyes of the Han Airlords who ruled North America as titular tributaries of the Most Magnificent.

The notion of awakening elsewhere or elsewhen after a long period of sleep or unconsciousness was already a staple of imaginative fiction. Rip Van Winkle did it back in 1819, and the leading characters in Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888), H.G. Wells's *When the Sleeper Wakes* (1898) and George Allan England's *Darkness and Dawn* (1914), to mention a few, awaken in the far future after protracted bouts of slumber. Nowlan was using what was already an established tradition in the scientific romance genre, adding extrapolations of his own based on 1920s concerns about a possible social or economic collapse of the United States and the threat of another world war or even an invasion. One of the favored contenders for this feared invasion was the Oriental, and the Yellow Peril had been a popular bogey even before thriller writer Sax Rohmer came up with the insidious Dr. Fu Manchu back in 1912.

Rogers wakes up just in time to join the local guerrilla movement in its fight against the Mongolians. The American underground has come up with antigravity flying belts and rocket guns, and Rogers, somewhat in the manner of Mark Twain's Connecticut Yankee, draws on knowledge from his own home time to cook up some winning strategies. He meets Wilma Deering, who is destined to be *the* woman in his life, soon after emerging from the mine. A dedicated freedom fighter, Wilma, as *Twentieth Century Science Fiction Writers* points out, "although occasionally given to the fainting spells and fits of weeping which were *de rigueur* for women in popular fiction," is considerably more competent and active than most comparable female SF characters. Rogers, Wilma, and his other new comrades pretty much save America in Nowlan's 30,000 word sequel, "The Airlords of Han," which appeared in *Amazing Stories* the following year. By that time Anthony Rogers, under what was felt to be a snappier name, was the hero of his own newspaper comic strip.

John Flint Dille was a graduate of the University of Chicago, and by the late 1920s he was operating a feature syndicate in the Windy City. In *Comics*

and Their Creators, published in 1942, two years after Phil Nowlan's death, Dille explained that the concept for Buck Rogers took several years to develop properly and that the creators wanted to produce "a strip which would present imaginary adventures several centuries in the future. . . . a strip in which the theories in the test tubes and laboratories of the scientists could be garnished up with a bit of imagination and treated as realities." So Dille helped encourage Nowlan to turn the *Amazing* story into a comic strip. And it was Dille who decided their hero needed a livelier name and borrowed the first name of popular movie cowboy Buck Jones.

The artist chosen to launch Buck on his career was Dick Calkins. In his middle thirties at the time and a graduate of the Chicago Art Institute, Calkins had been a newspapaer cartoonist since before World War I and had worked on the Detroit *Free Press* and the Chicago *Examiner*. Just as the war was ending, he entered the United States Air Service and got his commission as a pursuit pilot. He never went overseas. But his brief stint as an aviator made a lasting impression on him, and well into the 1930s he was still signing himself Lt. Dick Calkins. Ever since he'd joined Dille's syndicate in the late 1920s as a staff artist, Calkins had been trying to interest the boss in a comic strip about cavemen and dinosaurs. Apparently assuming that someone who could depict the dim past ought to be able to do the same for the far future, Dille picked Calkins to be Nowlan's partner. *Buck Rogers*, at first a daily only, made its debut on Monday, January 7, 1929. That was, purely by chance, the day the first *Tarzan* strip appeared.

Newspaper comics, most of them striving to be funny, had gotten going in this country at the end of the 19th century, and fantasy — including space travel — was there almost from the start, in such pages as *Little Nemo*. By the World War I years the idea of continuity was well established, and readers bought papers each and every day to find out what was going to happen next in strips like *The Gumps*. Adventure found its way into the funny papers in the 1920s with the likes of *Wash Tubbs* and *Bobby Thatcher*. What *Buck Rogers* did was take a completely serious approach to comic strip storytelling. More importantly, it introduced many science-fiction notions to a general public that had little interest in or knowledge of either book or pulp magazine SF. The strip popularized the props and paraphernalia — ray guns, rocket ships, robots, etc. — that heretofore had been the property of the pulps. Buck would serve as a sort of ambassador for science fiction, bringing many of the concepts of what was then a literature for the happy few to a much wider audience.

One of those who got the message was a Midwestern lad named Ray Bradbury. Many years later he recalled the impact of the early strips on him and said, "What, specifically, did Buck Rogers have to offer that instantly 'zapped' us into blind gibbers of love? Well, to start out with mere trifles . . . rocket guns that shoot explosive bullets; people who fly through the air with 'jumping belts' . . . 'hovercrafts' skimming over the surface of the earth; dis-

integrators which destroyed, down to the meanest atom, anything they touched; radar-equipped robot armies; television-controlled rockets and rocket bombs; invasions from Mars; the first landing on the Moon."

The strip wasted no time. On the very first day readers saw Buck wake up five hundred years in the future and meet Wilma, who seemed to be capable of flying through the air, and they also got a hint that some sort of conflict was going on. Before the week was out, it was learned that many years earlier the Mongol Reds from the Gobi Desert attacked America and that "the country's industrial, transportation, and credit structures crumbled. Government ceased to exist." Furthermore, "on the ruins of New York, San Francisco, Detroit, and a dozen others, the Mongols reared cities of superscientific magnificence." Gradually the Americans, who lived now mostly in the wilds and woodlands, were rebuilding, and they had created organizations, known as Orgs, to carry on a guerrilla war against the ruthless invaders. Wilma is a member of one of these and is quickly established as feisty, independent, and somewhat taken with Buck.

There is considerable racism in the early sequences. The Mongols are seen as "cruel, greedy, and unbelievably ruthless." Next to exterminating Caucasians, their favorite sport is breeding with them — "She is a perfect specimen! The Emperor will reward us highly." The resultant half-breeds are scorned by Buck and his cohorts.

As an artist, Lt. Calkins was barely adequate. Anatomy, perspective, inking techniques, and other basics of his chosen profession he had never been able to master completely. Even much of his staging was clumsy, and he was clearly no match for Hal Foster, the master craftsman who was doing the rival *Tarzan* strip. But Calkins had considerable enthusiasm and an almost boyish fondness for the gimmicks and gadgets that were so important to the strip. When a new science-fiction prop was introduced, he would provide a diagram in most cases. This no doubt gave younger readers the impression that, with luck and possibly a helping hand from an adult, they could follow these plans and actually build their own hovercrafts, ray guns, and robots. *Buck Rogers*, by the way, was an early champion of robots and was already using them in its first year in business. That was only a few years after the word robot had come into the language by way of Karel Capek's play *R.U.R.*

Scriptwriter Nowlan seems to have been a bit restless, and he ignored his Asian invaders now and then to introduce other popular SF elements. Early in the strip's second year, Martians visit Earth and readers got their first look at the Tiger Men — who were the red planet equivalents of Mongols. Like many a flying saucer visitor to come, the Martians are interested in collecting and examining human specimens. Wilma is one of the specimens they pick, and this starts Buck on a new adventure. In this particular sequence he is inspired to design the world's very first interplanetary rocket ship so that he can rescue other kidnap victims who have been taken back to

Mars — "Roaring rockets! We'll show these Martians who's who in this solar system!" Calkins dutifully provides a diagram of the ship, complete with Inertron lift-ballast, electroformers, and liquid Ultronium ballast.

The strip soon developed a cast of regulars, most of whom stuck around for most of the run. There was Dr. Huer, brilliant scientist and quintessential egghead (although in his earliest appearances he had a handsome head of curly locks), who served as Buck's friend and mentor and seemed to begin just about every sentence with the word "Heh!"; Killer Kane, traitor and all-around scoundrel, who was Buck's archrival; Black Barney, who started out as a villainous airpirate and then became one of Buck and Wilma's staunchest sidekicks.

A Sunday page was added early in 1930, introducing more new characters. In fact, Buck Rogers himself didn't appear at all in the early Sunday continuities and was only an occasional visitor throughout the 1930s. The star was a teenager named Buddy Deering, a hitherto unheralded brother of Wilma. Buddy, obviously intended to appeal to the youthful readers who were supposed to make up a large part of the audience for Sunday funnies, was a bright and inventive lad, and he got himself involved with a Martian princess and journeyed to Mars in his very first adventure. Her name was Alura and she was of the Golden People, a different race than the Tiger folks.

Apparently, Mars was such a big place that Buddy never bumped into Buck, who was up there at the same time that he was, but in the dailies. Mars looked pretty much like the Earth of the 25th century, with huge futuristic cities and a citizenry that went around dressed in paramilitary outfits. The wilderness areas were thick with giant cacti, giant mushrooms, and other elephantine flora.

Astute readers may have noticed that the Sunday pages were considerably better looking than the daily strips. This was because a talented young man named Russell Keaton was ghosting the Sundays. Born in Mississippi, he'd come to Chicago to study at the Academy of Fine Arts, and he was hired by Calkins while still in his teens. He and another young cartoonist, Zack Mosley, also worked on another strip that Calkins was producing for the Dille syndicate, an aviation adventure titled *Skyroads*. Eventually, both Keaton and Mosley, no doubt influenced by their boss, became licensed pilots. Keaton stayed with the *Buck Rogers* Sundays for several years and then moved on. He was replaced by another young ghost-artist, Rick Yager.

The feature, especially on Sundays, was plotted somewhat in the manner of a 19th-century Victorian picaresque novel. There was a great deal of wandering — by flying belt, rocket ship, and even on foot. Characters drifted in and out of the narrative and seemed to get killed, but they showed up alive later on, assuming new identities. Reunions and separations were frequent, as were discoveries of long lost kin. The trappings, of course, were far from Dickensian and offered the reader the latest in weapons, modes of transpor-

tation, and lifestyles of the future. By 1939 the atomic bomb was appearing in the strip. Again, Nowlan was introducing something that had been written about in science-fiction magazines — as well, obviously, as scientific journals — for quite some time. With the advent of World War II most of the villains again became Orientals. In the dailies a new order of Martians appeared, looking quite Japanese. On Sundays descendants of the Japanese responsible for the attack on Pearl Harbor give Buddy, Barney, Doc, *et al.*, trouble out in space.

Buck Rogers also played an important part in the development of the comic book. A reprint Buck comic book was used as a premium by Kellogg's in 1933, which was before modern format comic books had ever appeared on the newsstands. In 1934 *Famous Funnies*, the first regularly issued monthly comic book, was put on sale and established the format and price for all that followed. The Buck Sunday pages, usually four per issue, started in the third issue of *Famous Funnies*. Actually, it was Buck Roger's name and not our hero himself that figured prominently in these pioneering comic books of the early and middle 1930s. What got reprinted were the Sunday pages, and as we've seen, Buck rarely worked on Sundays. The rest of the gang, with only an occasional drop in by the titular head, was in *Famous Funnies* to its 218th and final issue, except for a few missed issues along the way.

It seems likely that Buck's associates, who were among the first flying people to be seen in comic books, had an influence on the flying superheroes who came along in the original material magazines of the later 1930s. Most of the costumed crimefighters, from Superman onward, seemed to be flying through the air the same way that Buddy and Wilma did, except that they didn't wear flying belts but relied on superpowers, magic words, and other mystical means.

Almost as impressive as Buck's daring exploits 500 years in the future was his career as a merchandising star in the grim Depression decade of the 1930s. His accomplishments in the 1930s became a model for the standard operating procedures of many a later media superstar. In 1932 a *Buck Rogers* radio show had taken to the air, heard every day in 15-minute installments and sponsored by Kellogg's — "So let us twirl the dials of our teleradioscope — and tune in on a scene — the main control cabin of the patrol ship — far out in space." In various forms the serial was heard throughout most of the 1930s and well into the 1940s, sponsored by such kid products as Cocomalt, Popsicles, and Cream of Wheat. In 1933 the first Buck Big Little Book was printed. Entitled *Buck Rogers, 25th Century A.D.*, it utilized doctored artwork from the daily strip to illustrate a fat, pocket-sized novel. Several more Buck BLBs appeared in the 1930s.

But Buck was most successful in the area of toys. In 1934 Daisy began manufacturing Buck Rogers rocket pistols, and that same year the Louis Marx company introduced a toy rocket ship. "The first Buck Rogers Rocket Pistol was the XZ-31," explains Robert Lesser in *A Celebration of Comic*

Art and Memorabilia. "It was made from heavy-gauge blued gun steel with nickel-plated trimmings, made a loud 'zap' when fired, and was nine and a half inches in length. . . . It was the same design as shown in the daily and Sunday comics and added *zap* and *to get zapped* to our language. It sold for 50 cents retail at Macy's and Gimbel's and cost only 5 cents to make. It was the toy 'hit' of 1934." The man at Daisy who was the champion of Buck Rogers was Cass Hough, who was a friend of Calkins and a fellow pilot. He was sales manager at the time, and he told Lesser that nobody else at Daisy shared his enthusiasm for the sales possibilities of futuristic armaments and weaponry. But he was given the go-ahead and he got Macy's in Manhattan interested. "Macy's did an excellent job of getting the public 'ready for Buck Rogers,' a week before the guns were put on sale," said Hough. "They did such a good job that, came Monday morning the guns went on sale, there were in the neighborhood of 2,000 people in line outside the door (according to the police) to buy this rocket pistol. And as the day went on, the crowds grew so that by late afternoon when Macy's were all but out of merchandise, we ran our own truck from Plymouth, Michigan (where we were then located), to New York, and kept trucks on the road all that week." Soon everybody seemed to want to "sell Buck Rogers rocket pistols, and Daisy was running nights and Saturdays to try to take care of the demand."

Daisy produced several other Buck Rogers guns, including the Liquid Helium Water Gun X2-44 and, in 1946, an atomic pistol. Other companies put forth rocket skates, space suits, casting sets (that enabled you to make your own tin soldiers), pocket watches, wrist watches, clocks, pencil boxes, and sneakers. According to Lesser, "the most expensive item made during the Depression years sold for the astronomical sum of $13 retail . . . the Buck Rogers 25th Century Scientific Laboratory combined chemistry, microscopy, and astronomy in a gigantic, super-science set. It was packaged in a large box and, with all of the equipment, weighed twelve pounds."

There was also a club to be joined. It was called the Buck Rogers Solar Scouts, and members were recruited via the newspaper strip and comic books. Even the coupons were exciting, and a typical one started off "I want to join your BUCK ROGERS SOLAR SCOUTS and fly with you on rocket ship adventures to distant planets." Among the ranks that could be attained were Chief Explorer, Space Ship Commander, Supreme Inner Circle Member and, for girls, Interplanetary Nurse. An enlistment form was sent out to would-be joiners, and on it you had to promise not only to be "upright, honest, clean in mind and body, helpful to the weak and aged," but also to "maintain passing grades" in school. Getting to be a Chief Explorer wasn't easy.

Buck also conquered the silver screen in the 1930s. Universal released a 12-chapter serial in 1939, with Buster Crabbe as Buck and Constance Moore as Wilma. Anthony Warde, who made a career of playing serial heavies, was cast in the role of Killer Kane. Not exactly a gem in the chapter

play genre, *Buck Rogers* took place on Earth and Saturn. In addition to the expected rocket ship battles, there was also a dirigible sequence. Crabbe had by this time portrayed several other comic strip heroes in serials, including Tarzan, Red Barry and, most notably, Flash Gordon. The serial was later condensed into a 101-minute feature film. Under the title *Destination Saturn*, and making even less sense than in the longer form, it still shows up on television in hours other than prime time. An original *Buck Rogers* TV show was seen on ABC during the 1950-51 season. The title role was played, in turn, by two now-forgotten actors, Kem Dibbs and Robert Pastene. A lady named Lou Prentis was Wilma. According to one history of television, "production was on the cheap side."

When Buck first awoke on the comic pages, back in 1929, he had no competition in the SF field. It wasn't until the early 1930s, when Buck was a proven success, that emulators came along. Newspaper mogul William Randolph Hearst was especially taken with science fiction, and his syndicates introduced not one but two new strips. *Brick Bradford*, written by William Ritt and drawn by Clarence Gray, came along in the summer of 1933. Even tougher competition was *Flash Gordon*, written by Don Moore and drawn by Alex Raymond, that began as a handsome Sunday page in January of 1934. Although the saga of Flash, Dale Arden, and Ming the Merciless on the planet Mongo was written in a florid pulpwood style, the artwork of the young Raymond was exceptional. *Flash Gordon* became one of Hearst's more successful comics, and while it didn't rival *Buck Rogers* when it came to toys and merchandising, it did provide some stiff competition in the funny papers. And Flash, as noted, beat Buck into the movie houses.

Buck's comic strip began to undergo a variety of changes in the 1940s. According to cartoonist Murphy Anderson, "Phil Nowlan, the originator, was fired from the strip before he died. He was fired for getting too 'far out.' " If this is so, it may account for the fact that Nowlan was again writing for the SF pulps at the time of his death in 1940. Calkins apparently wrote as well as drew the daily from that point, and Yager scripted and drew the Sunday. Yager did some very impressive Sunday pages in the 1940s, especially in the sequences wherein Buck, Black Barney, and the rest got to battle an entire planet full of sinister Orientals, the dreaded Yellow Invaders from the Rising Sun Planet. Calkins left the feature in 1947, and Anderson, who'd begun his career drawing for *Planet Comics*, took over the drawing of the daily until 1949 and came back again for a short spell in 1958. He brought a more realistic approach to the artwork, giving Doc Huer a normal size forehead at last and even redesigning Buck's helmet. Buck was less preoccupied with Oriental conspiracies by this time, though he and his comrades liked to refer to aliens as "gooks." By the late 1950s, after several comings and goings by Yager, Anderson, and others, George Tuska took over both the daily and the Sunday. The syndicate brought in real science-fiction writers again, among them Fritz Leiber and Judith Merril, and

Buck's adventures became somewhat more sophisticated. Tuska, who had long labored in comic books noted for what collectors call Good Girl Art, added quite a few sexy ladies to the decor. Despite all this, the feature kept losing papers. The Sunday ended in 1965 and the daily two years later. But Buck Rogers wasn't exactly dead, he only slept.

Buck returned in 1979 and was seen in a feature film, starring Gil Gerard. This led to a television series and a comic strip. This new version was written by Jim Lawrence and drawn by Gray Morrow and syndicated by the New York *Times*. It didn't thrive.

Buck Rogers is apparently now poised for yet another comeback. It will be interesting to see what sort of future he has in store for him this time around.

#1: BOOGEYMEN

He is standing outside the window.
Alone. In the dark.
He is barely breathing.
His hands are moving at his sides.
Clenching. Unclenching.
Breathing in their own right.

A mist of sweat
films his brow,
driven there by the slow fire
of his need.

Clenching. Unclenching.

He is barely breathing
as he peeks between the curtains
at the child in bed,
who is watching the closet
for boogeymen.

— Del Stone, Jr.

THE LAST DANGEROUS LUNACY

by Darrell Schweitzer

art: David Edward Martin

The author informs us that this is his fourth Tom O'Bedlam story; the previous three, "Tom O'Bedlam's Night Out," "Raving Lunacy," and "Continued Lunacy," were published either in Amazing® Stories *or* Fantastic. *The first three stories have been included in the author's collection,* Tom O'Bedlam's Night Out and Other Strange Excursions *(Ganley, 1985), which focuses on this traditional character in English folklore.*

The author currently works as a partner in the Owlswick Literary Agency, with George H. Scithers and John Gregory Betancourt.

Alas, my wisdom has been lost to the ages.
— Ulmeric the Forgetful (dates uncertain)

"Will we go on forever, Tom, mad forever, Tom?" said Nick the Lunatic, who had been Nick the Gaoler in the days when he had been Tom O'Bedlam's keeper. "I mean, *will it end*?"

Tom ran on his hands through the mud and cobbles and crowds and stray cats of London, his toes wiggling in the air through his soleless shoes. Nick huffed behind him, pausing when he could to tweedle on a flute.

Around them, people stopped and stared. A few tossed coins, which Tom snatched with one hand, then flipped into the air with perfect aim, caught them in his toes, and let them rattle down into his shoes.

"To be mad is to go on!" shouted Tom. "Go on! Go forth! Go to! Go to the Devil and back again! It is to forget beginnings and endings, to live, to see, and to feel, but not to think. Thinking causes mildew of the brain, ague between the ears, cramps in the cranium. If you are mad, my dear friend, you need no answer. Thunder rage! Skulls clatter and smash! Why should anyone ask? Why should *you* ask?"

"The Moon sang to me last night," Nick said. "That's why."

But Tom wasn't there. He was scurrying in his odd, upside-down way alongside a fine carriage.

"Mercy!" cried ragged Tom, muddy Tom. "God and the saints have mercy on poor Tom, and God save King Harry, too, but first have mercy on poor Tom who's sold his soles to the Devil, sold 'em both in terrible bargaining, just to get away from Hell's fires when his madness took him where he did not want to go. Mercy, for his feet were boiled, and his brains were boiled along with them —"

Tom began to sing, and Nick danced behind him, playing his flute, the bells on his cap and the *slap-slap* of Tom's hands on the pavement keeping time:

I went down to Satan's kitchen,
For to get some food one morning,
And there I saw souls piping hot,
All on a spit a-turning!

And the window of that fine carriage slid open, and a lady, fine as the carriage itself, with a fine handkerchief held to her nose, tossed out a gold piece. Tom let it bounce once, then caught it deftly in his teeth.

He tumbled upright and stood gasping, while pennies trickled out of his shoes. Nick lowered his flute.

"Tom. Last night. I say the Moon sang to me —"

"Faith, 'tis a proud and lonely thing to be Moonstruck, even in company," Tom said, wagging his finger like a pedant. He watched the finger for a moment, as if it had a life of its own, then caught hold of it with his other hand.

When Tom lectured like this, he always seemed very wise, but one had to be mad to appreciate it.

Nick said, "I dreamed a terrible, grim dream —"

"No, you had a vision. Your eyes were opened. You must let the scales fall from your eyes, Nicholas. I once knew a man who didn't. After a while they accumulated, and he had a face like a snake."

"Tom!" Nick jumped up and down, splashing mud, jangling his bells. "Let me tell you!"

All around people stopped and pointed, laughed and shrugged, then went about their daily business, for they were not mad and tended to miss the important things.

"Tom, last night, as we slept in the pig-monger's loft, I dreamed the king of the rats came to me, all dressed in his fine cloak. His crown was the ring of a human king, and his scepter was that king's finger bone. And all his subject rats stirred under the straw as the king said to me, *'He shall speak and he shall sing to you, and when he is done, we shall have our feast of you, so at least you're good for something. This I am sent to tell.'* Then the Moon rose outside, and its light filled the loft. You slept beside me, Tom, in my dream, while the rats made the straw roll like the sea, and the moonbeams touched you —"

"I dreamed of the Moon, too," said Tom. "It fell from the sky and lay in a country lane, there in the dirt like a bright penny. But when I went to pick it up, it merely rippled, like a reflection in water."

"Tom, please, listen to me — The Moon looked harsh and cold and cruel, and I couldn't see the Man in the Moon or his dog or his thorn. But the Moon sang to me, and its song was a-banging and a-clanging, like pots in a hurricane, like the fierce drums of war. I tried to wake up then because I was afraid, but bony hands held me down, and the rat-king whispered in my ear: *'Hist and list to what our master doth proclaim.'*"

"He spoke most royally," said Tom.

"He did, aye," said Nick. "Then the Moon bled red blood, whole oceans of it pouring down the sky like a cloak, and *he* stood before me, with his shining bright skull of a face and his red cloak that covered the stars. Oh, he was taller than towers and steeples, Tom, taller than mountains, and I saw the sky between his bones. And he said, *'Nick, you're come for. 'Tis your time'.* And he showed me an hourglass filled with blood, and all the blood had dripped into the bottom part. And I was frozen, Tom. I could not move, even as he took out a pair of shears from underneath his cloak. He shrank down some, and he wasn't no taller than the loft, and his face filled the window — and he went for me, then and there. I had to roll quick, and the rats squeaked and scattered. I fell down among the pigs. And the moon-man-bag-o'bones leaned in through the window, *right over you, Tom,* while he snapped at the air with his shears. The pigs were terrible frightened and started squealing, and I did, too, and so he couldn't tell us apart, and that's how I escaped till dawn."

Tom paused and considered the tale, then said slowly, "And just before I woke I dreamed that a cold breeze blew in through the window, cold and hard, like winter iron in the air."

"Then, Tom, you know —"

"You know — you know —" cried ravens, fluttering among housetops.

Suddenly, a cold winter breeze blew, and people all around drew their cloaks tight and held onto their hats.

And in silence, and casting silence before it like a shadow until all the city was still, a sinister carriage rushed toward Nick and Tom. No one else seemed to see it. No one else moved, all the passersby standing frozen in a single instant of time, while the huge carriage swayed in silence.

Nearby, smoke from a chimney hung motionless in the air.

The carriage was tall and black and draped in black, with wheels the color of old bones. Four creatures drew it, things with the bodies of horses and the clawed legs of birds. And their upper bodies were like men, so they resembled centaurs, only each of them held his detached head by the hair with a hand, pulling at the harness with his other hand. Pale steam rose from their open necks, and the darkness gathered about them and the carriage, like dust from the road, until the eyes in their dangling heads shone like terrible beacons.

This carriage stopped before the two lunatics, its curtains parted, and a red-cloaked bone man leaned out.

"I have you in my appointment book," he said, in a voice like a wind rustling through dead leaves.

He held up a tablet made of little gravestones linked together with iron rings. There was a name on each stone. He flipped through them, and the stones slapped together like thunder, shooting sparks.

"Your names are written here," he said. "Somewhere. I shall find them

very soon."

Nick yelped and fainted dead away, but Tom stood trembling and was somehow able to ask, "Are you the Reaper, then?"

"No," the bone man said, "but I am kin to him. He is so badly overworked in these centuries, there being such a demand for Doom and Desolation and Utter Demise, that the whole family is called out, even unto the cousins and cousins of cousins and illegitimate issue, who can but cause itches and sneezing and vague unease. All of us. My three sisters spin your lives and thread your lives and *snip!* your lives. For I am called Cousin *Snip*!"

His long arm reached out of the carriage like a striking snake, and he snipped at Tom with his bloody shears and nearly took the top of Tom's head off. Tom ducked, none to soon, and the passage of the blades left him almost bald, a cloud of hair settling down over him.

He fell to the ground, then sat up, running a hand over his now stubbled pate.

"A barber-ous assault, truly!"

The head-toting steeds which drew the carriage began to scratch the pavement with their terrible feet, and their eyes glowed a furious red. They moaned and hissed from out of their gaping necks, tugging at the harness. The carriage swayed, and Cousin Snip pulled himself back inside.

"They are impatient to be drinking souls," said Cousin Snip, "and even I cannot restrain them when their frenzy is upon them. But I shall be back for you, little man, and for your companion, for your time is due, and it is now."

Then, silently as it had arrived, the carriage slid away like a great black, haunted galleon in a nightmare, and it vanished into the depths of the city of London. The day brightened somewhat. People began to move and talk, and the smoke drifted from the chimney once more. But the air was distinctly colder than it had been. Tom felt the chill on his shorn head. His scalp tingled. He reached into one of his voluminous pockets for a crumpled hat and put it on.

Nick still lay senseless at his feet.

"Get up," he said, prodding him with his toe. "Sure, this is no time to be snoozing about."

Nick opened one eye in fright, then the other more assuredly as he saw Tom standing over him.

"I must be mad," muttered Nick, "for I thought I saw —"

"You *are* mad," Tom said softly, "and you did see. Soon the poor dull folk will see it, too, soon enough."

Nick rose unsteadily to his feet, and the two of them walked into an alley, their heads low. Rats scattered before them, vanishing between barrels, under doors. One of them wore a crown and carried a finger-bone scepter.

The wind blew cold. In the alley, the darkness gathered more swiftly than the sun set.

That was the day the plague entered the city. Soon church bells tolled and

dead-wagons creaked through the streets.

"What's an honest lunatic to do in such a time," Nick asked, "for we cannot sing or frolic?"

The two of them sat on a low wall, waving at passersby and shouting scraps of gibberish, occasionally falling off to maintain appearances, but there was little interest in their antics. It was morning, the sky a brilliant blue. The house across the way from them had a large **X** painted on its door.

Tom rocked back and forth, keening softly, deep in thought.

"Well, Tom? What do we do?"

Tom turned to him abruptly.

"What? What ho! What ha!"

"What?"

" 'Sblood! Say what! Say who! Be mad! It solves your problems, madness does!"

"Not this one, Tom," Nick said sadly. "I am so afraid, it's enough to make me recover my reason."

"By all that's addled!" shouted Tom, leaping down from the wall, scattering rats. (One of them wore a crown. The others bore him along on a litter made of a handkerchief.) "By the Hag of Dreams and her hungry goblins! 'Tis a terrifying, calamitous thing to go sane again, after such long, sweet madness!"

"But Tom, what else can we do?" Nick asked mournfully.

Tom waved impatiently, and Nick dropped off the wall and landed beside him. Tom took Nick by the arm and dragged him along the street.

"Now come ye here and look ye here, and melt thy brain from the looking. Your woe problematical, and problem woeful, sirrah, good friend, bosom companion, is that for all I have instructed thee and destructed thee and tried to erase the last vestige of thy conquered Fortress Reason — is that *you aren't mad enough!* There be degrees of madness, even as there be degrees of everything."

"There are no degrees in the grave, Tom, after men have been snipped."

"That's a *sane* thought, Nick. Put it from ye. Now remember how it was before you were born, when Lord and Lady Death spoke your name for the first time in their great hall made of black stones and white bones, in the Land Beneath Winter. Remember that. Cling to it. Think on it till it all comes racing back, as the tide over flat sand. They sighed when they had to surrender you to life. Remember the trumpets and the drums, Nick, the rattle of empty skulls, the cymbals hammered from tomb brasses the ghouls had stolen — remember? Remember the mighty roar and thunder as an angel picked you up with a pair of tongs and dropped you down a great well, down, down, through many dreams and much darkness, the spirits and ghosts shouting all around you, until you tumbled into your mother's womb."

"How do you remember this, Tom?"

"Nick, I am in your debt, for once when you were my keeper and I was close confined in Bedlam, you said you'd chastise me for my ravings, and you did, with a shovel. You did not understand what you had done, but the blow on the head set me into deep contemplation, and when I at last awoke, everything was clear —"

"Tom, have we another shovel?"

They stepped into a doorway to avoid a corpse-wagon. A man in black trailed behind, ringing a bell, chanting, "Remember, remember . . ."

And still they walked, until they came to the edge of the city and were in a country lane.

"A thousand years, was it, Tom?"

"Aye, a thousand, for it takes that long for Lord and Lady Death to surrender their charges, and it is a long, long drop. There is a noisy celebration and lamentation, like a wake in reverse, and they look longingly ahead to the time when you will be returned to them."

"I think I remember it all, now, Tom."

"Remember, remember," cawed a circling crow. (It wore a crown.)

"No *sane* man could remember such things, could he?" Tom said triumphantly.

"He could not. So I —"

"So, now that you are sufficiently mad, Nick, it shall not strain you further to walk the breadth of England in a day and come to the western sea, will it?"

"It will not, Tom."

So they went, and the sun did not set on them. Perhaps they folded the air and the land and took a short route, or they rode upon a hippogriff, or they merely jumped into the air and let the Earth turn beneath them. In madness all such things are alike.

They came, in the evening, to the shore of the western ocean and looked out from atop jagged cliffs while sea birds circled overhead, squawking, *"Remember, remember . . ."* (And one of them wore a crown, which gleamed like amber in the fading sunlight.)

And when the sun had entirely disappeared and the last faint trace of gold was gone from the horizon, a ship appeared on the dark sea, white against the brilliant stars, curved like a swan, wrought with rare woods and with ivory, with silver bells ringing from its masts, and its silken sails spread wide.

"It is sheer madness to know," Tom said, "that each of those bells speaks with the tongue of a pagan magician who gave up his tongue to speak his secrets to the wind so that all the world might be made magical again."

"It is," said Nick.

"And it is madder still to recognize that yonder ship is bound for the Blessed Isles, where neither Cousin Snip nor any of his relatives nor Lord

and Lady Death themselves may follow."

"Surely that is madness," said Nick.

"Then let us go!"

They clambered down the beach and waded into the surf. Just as the moon rose in the east, over the cliffs, and the moonlight touched the water and the ship, the ship began to fade. Nick shouted. Tom struggled all the harder until, at last, he caught hold of the ship's side. It was no more substantial than a cloud at first, and his hand passed through, but he grabbed a rope and pulled himself aboard, and the deck was solid enough. He reached back for Nick, who leapt up out of the sea, and barely caught him.

Beneath the sky on a wine-dark sea they sailed, through a night that was many years in length, yet seemed no more than a second (for they did not age, nor did they grow weary), until they arrived at the Blessed Isles, in the company of wizards and witches and countless spirits. There they saw wonders untold, beauties undescribed, and secrets unimaginable. They met satyrs and old, forgotten gods and the saints unknown to the One God, and they dwelt with this strange company timelessly in a castle of flowers that floated on a lake as smooth as a mirror. Even afterwards, Tom and Nick remained reticent about these things, and therefore, alas, the wonders have remained untold, the beauties undescribed, and the secrets unimagined by those who have not seen them. Of the terrible majesty and of the words uttered by the shining Faces they saw reflected in that mirror-smooth water, there was never a hint. Anyone who has been to the Blessed Isles gets that way after a while, which is why reports thence are scarce and unreliable.

But it is certain that the blue lake actually *was* a mirror, for the King of the Blessed Isles picked it up one day to look at his nose in it, and Tom and Nick tumbled out of the flower castle into his royal lap.

He picked them up gently with tweezers and set them on his nightstand, then stood up, looming over them, blue and distant as a mountain.

"Ah, little ones," said the king. "I have been amused by you, and I have shared your dreams and your visions. Even your songs have come to me on the faint wind in the evening, and they are good songs, having no trace of sense in them."

Tom bowed respectfully, but Nick cowered on the tabletop.

"Your awesome majesty is pleased," Tom said.

"My awesome majesty is pleased, and I shall reward you before you leave."

"Leave, Your Awesomeness?"

The king stroked his beard gently. It rippled like an avalanche passing down a snowy slope.

"Well, yes. All mortals have to leave the Blessed Isles eventually, unless they are pagan magicians and the like and have sold their souls. The proper procedure is for them to return to their people with awesome and mysterious gifts, and for them to live among their people for the rest of their days as

repositories of deep and visionary wisdom. I foresee, for Time is as naught to me, that in some distant and misty eon hence, Mr. Campbell shall write *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* about this very thing. So it must be the correct procedure. Yes."

"Leave?"

"Besides, if they did not leave, they would not be mortals, now, would they? That's logic. One of our pagans explained it to me once. Clever chap."

"Alas!" sobbed Nick. Tom, for once, could say nothing.

"Therefore, take your reward and go," said the king.

A small leather box materialized in Tom's hands. He opened it and saw five jars within, white, red, yellow, black, and clear. The final one, the clear one, seemed filled with swirling grey smoke.

"When you need them," said the king, "open them. Each is more magical than the previous, and more terrible. Now depart, as you must."

Suddenly they were wearing cold, sticky boots made of fish scales and smelling of the sea. The king's bedchamber darkened and was gone, the ceiling fading into a starry sky. Tom and Nick found themselves on a beach once more, on the very rim of the Blessed Isles, where the Isles drifted near to England that night. In the darkness, not too far away, a church bell tolled.

The bells of the Blessed Isles rang, too, saying, "Go . . . go . . . go . . ."

And they went, stepping out onto the water. The fish-scale boots held them up, and as soon as they were off the beach, the Blessed Isles dissolved into mist.

England loomed before them, black against the night sky, rimmed with white surf crashing against the base of sea cliffs. Tom and Nick walked on for a while in silence, Tom clutching the box containing the jars. He touched a pebbly beach, and Nick followed. Their fish-scale boots fell into heaps of loose scales, flaking away from their shins, and they trudged on, barefoot, and stinking of old fish.

Atop the cliffs, at a crossroads, they met an old woman weeping.

"Why are you sad?" Nick asked her. "For this may not be the Blessed Isles, but at least it is England. Is it not wonderful to be in England?"

"No, it is not," she sobbed. "The whole country has gone mad."

"That too must be wonderful," Nick said.

She looked at the two of them strangely, and with dread, and continued weeping. They walked on a little farther. After a while they realized that this was not the England they had left. Here and there, burnt-out shells of farmhouses stood silently, and dead soldiers lay among trampled crops. Flocks of crows perched on the soldiers' faces, cawing back and forth, *"Remember! Remember! Such a feast we have been given!"*

Then the full Moon rose over the battlefield, and the Moon was old and dead and cold, without any Man in it; and the Moon bled until the sky was streaked with red, and the Moon wore a scarlet cloak and shrank down until it became a terrible visage Tom and Nick knew all too well.

Cousin Snip stood before them, the night wind wheezing through his bones. Behind him, the four centaur-things shuffled by his scratched and battered carriage, swinging their heads wearily to and fro.

Shears gleamed in the moonlight.

"Ye are due and overdue, a hundred years and more. We had an appointment. Remember?"

And the crows rose up as one and circled overhead, shrieking, *"Remember! Remember!"*

(Tom had no time to notice if one of them wore a crown.)

"Yes, I remember," said Tom. "I remember an urgent need to be far from here —"

"Very," said Nick.

They turned and ran across the battlefield, leaping over fallen men and horses, Tom clutching the box tightly. But they heard a rattling close behind them, and when they glanced back, they saw nothing because now the sound was in front of them.

The carriage waited, creaking and swaying, its door wide open.

Cousin Snip stood there, idly cutting at the air with his shears.

"Tom," said Nick. "Open the box."

Tom opened it, and Nick, in his haste, reached in and grabbed a jar at random, the black one, the fourth in the sequence, more dreadful than all but one. But there was no time to consider. He removed the stopper with his teeth and poured out the contents of the bottle.

Black powder sprinkled to the ground.

He and Tom just stood there, looking at it.

"Now what happens, Tom?"

Cousin Snip stepped forward impatiently.

"This, I think," Tom said. Straining at the weight of it, Tom handed Nick a huge book, dusty with black powder and bound in what looked too much like human skin. The covers rippled, like muscles flexing.

"What is it?"

Tom opened the book as Nick held it, and read: "Ye Booke called *Ale Azeef*, or *Ye Necronomicon*, writ by ye learned Moor Abdool Al-Hazred, translated from ye original tongue by Necrophilius of Chorazin —"

"Tom?"

"Yes, Nick?"

"You can't read, can you?"

"Well, no. I cannot, being completely unlettered. It must be part of the magic."

"Too late!" cried Cousin Snip. "The only thing for you to read is this!"

The specter loomed over them, holding the gravestone tablet. All the other pages were gone, mere shards of broken stone dangling from the iron ring, but Tom and Nick's page was complete, their names glowing on it in white-hot letters.

"Too late!" shouted three of the centaur-things in unison as they brought the carriage rumbling forward. The fourth had lost his head somewhere in the hurry and confusion, and pulled silently, his neck steaming. The other three held up their heads toward Tom and Nick, eyes afire.

And Cousin Snip's shears gleamed in the moonlight as he reached down for the final cut.

"Hold this!" said Nick, heaving the book to one of the centaur-creatures. Instantly, the book hissed and wriggled. The creature that caught it dropped his head, struggling with the book with both hands. Cousin Snip, startled, lost his balance as Tom and Nick ducked around either side of him. The shears bit into the ground with a blinding flash of white light.

When Tom could see again, he realized he had been running for a long time. Nick panted beside him. Far behind, the centaur-things were reading aloud from the book, their voices rising to a cacophonous shriek, something about *"M'ghui, M'gdui, and M'glui."*

Lightning tore the sky from horizon to horizon. The ground shook from thunder. Dust rose on a furious wind. Tom caught a glance of dark tentacles streaming out of the carriage, and Cousin Snip frantically snipping away at them.

In another part of the field, when the night was still again, Tom sat gasping on a fallen tree trunk.

"Tom . . . we can't run forever. What shall we do?"

"Remain mad. Cling to our madness."

"That may not be enough, Tom."

"What else have we, besides four more jars?" Tom said sadly.

Then a voice came to them from behind the fallen tree.

"Please, sirs," it said. It was a young, soft voice. "Help me. I can't find my boots."

They leaned back and saw a boy lying there, in the tattered remains of what had been a brightly colored uniform. Nick covered his face and turned away, and Tom said merely, "Ah, lad, forget about boots. I can't even find your legs."

"I was afraid of that," the boy said. "I must be dead then. Will you help me up?"

"Yes, certainly. Take my hand."

"But, *Tom*," Nick hissed. "He's *dead* —"

"I think he's missed an appointment —"

Tom helped the boy up. He stood, out of his body, as transparent as steam, then sat with them on the log.

"You do not mind sitting with a ghost, kind sirs?" the boy asked politely.

"We're both mad," Nick said. "Not that it does us any good."

"The whole country's gone mad," the boy said.

They talked for a time. The ghost's name was Philip. In the fourteenth

year of his life he'd gone to serve the king against the traitor parliament and the arch-traitor Cromwell.

"Englishmen fighting Englishmen?" said Tom. "Surely things have changed in this past hundred years since we've been gone."

"It's all mad," said the ghost.

"No, it is not our kind of madness at all —"

"No wonder, like Cousin Snip told us, they had to call out the whole family," said Nick.

"Yes, the bone-man with the shears," said Philip the ghost. "He raged up and down the field, looking for someone in particular. All he said was '*Due and overdue*,' again and again. I think he overlooked me."

Just then hooves thudded nearby, and armor clattered. Horsemen fanned out of the darkness, encircling them. Tom and Nick were both too exhausted to move.

"Wrath-of-God Fletcher!" their leader called out. "Take those two!"

And a burly, harsh-looking fellow dismounted and stepped toward them.

Tom stood up on the log. Nick jangled the bells on his cap gently.

"Alas, your Wrathfulness, we three mean you —"

"Three? I see but two, and I think them Royalist dogs."

"God save the king!" Nick shouted.

Swords rasped from scabbards. Wrath-of-God Fletcher drew a pistol, cocked it, and took aim.

"God save King Harry the Eighth!" Tom cried. He bowed low. Nick, still seated on the log, removed his cap out of respect.

"Harry the bloody *Eighth*? He's been dead this hundred years. This is sixteen forty-five, ye loon —"

Tom quickly explained how the two of them lived in London in King Harry's time, before Cousin Snip had driven them to the Blessed Isles, and more than once he turned to Philip the ghost for confirmation of some point. The soldier couldn't see the ghost and grew all the more confused.

Wrath-of-God Fletcher backed away, slipping his pistol back into his belt.

"Truly, ye be mad, with diseased wits!"

Tom bowed like a courtier, removing his hat with a grand sweep.

"They can stop a bullet that's meant for sane men," said the commander of the troop. "We need them for the battle tomorrow."

"*No!* Shoot them now!" said a new voice.

Tom looked up and saw that one of the soldiers wore a torn scarlet cape and held a pair of bent shears still sticky with ichor and scraps of tentacle. The soldier's face shone through the bars of his helmet like a pale lantern.

Again Tom opened the box, and Nick took out a jar, the white one this time.

"Take me with you," Philip the ghost pleaded. Tom took him by the hand, then held onto Nick's belt as Nick opened the jar with his teeth, spitting out the stopper.

From within the jar came the purest scent of a summer meadow.

Tom awoke from a long, dark dream to find that he had been transformed into a flower, or perhaps a ragweed. He couldn't quite tell which. It was so comfortable, so easy to just sway gently in the warm breeze, there amid the tall grass, and forget about such things.

As far as he could see, the rolling fields of England stretched under a blue sky. Sheep grazed on a distant hillside. Nearer by, smoke rose gently from the chimney of a thatched cottage.

Tom was only vaguely aware of Nick being near him, likewise swaying in the breeze, in the form of a tall and scraggly dandelion. A white butterfly came to visit them, first Nick, then Tom, and by a sense he could neither understand nor describe, Tom knew the butterfly to be Philip the ghost.

Later, by starlight, Philip sat beside them in his ghostly form. Later still, at dawn, he became a bird and rose up, up, and was gone for a long time. When he returned, he told Tom and Nick of adventuring in lands atop the clouds.

"I remember them," said Tom. Somehow in his flower-form, he could speak, at least so that a ghost could hear him. He told the tale of how he had been changed into a bird once and had flown all the way to Egypt and back in a single night, to fetch two pennies off a dead king's eyes.

"And is that how you became mad?"

"No, but it confirmed me in my madness."

And so the months passed, and it was autumn. Philip resisted a strong urge to fly south for the winter. Tom and Nick withered.

Then, on a cold evening the Moon rose and sang to Nick as it had before, and a bright-faced, red-garbed figure came tramping over the fields, snipping here and there with a pair of bent shears. A single centaur-creature followed after, looking very much the worse for wear, mangy, spotted, one of the glowing eyes in its dangling head gone dark. Hundreds of old shoes were strung over its back, dragging in the grass.

Cousin Snip staggered, wheezing through his empty rib cage.

"At last I've found you. At last."

Stiff-stalked, Tom and Nick rattled in the wind.

The spectre reached into its tattered, stained cloak and got out the gravestone appointment book. Tom's and Nick's names still glowed on the single remaining page.

"You are due and due and overdue," said Cousin Snip, "and I've had a hard time explaining. I've run out of excuses. I cannot rest, I cannot even pause, until my assignment is fulfilled. So, please, be reasonable —"

"But we are not reasonable," said Tom. "We are mad. But you could be merciful."

Tom stood barefoot and ragged in the cold October field, changed back into a man.

"Consider, if you will," Cousin Snip panted, "our relative situations. You are mad, but you are still a man, with a soul, capable of entry into paradise. You have much to look forward to. I, on the other hand, am a dread and terrible specter, with no future except drudgery. It spoils my disposition to a shocking degree. I cannot find it within myself to be merciful."

"Not even a little bit?" asked Nick.

"No."

"Your shears are bent," said Tom.

"That only makes me more disagreeable."

Tom opened another bottle, the red one this time.

He sat in a fine coach and wore a long, white wig. Ladies of the court sat beside him, watching the endless lines of red-coated soldiers marching into ships.

"They'll teach the damn'd colonial rebels a lesson," he said grumpily, taking snuff.

"Yes, Your Majesty," the ladies said.

He was a king. He knew that much. Sometimes, in his more confused moments, he remembered being someone else. Such thoughts usually gave him a headache. Snuff was the best cure, or snuff and whiskey.

He took more snuff and let out a thunderous, royal sneeze, one worthy of King George the Third of England.

And so the years passed. He lost the war against the colonials, but he conquered India, which seemed like a good idea at the time, since it made tea less expensive. But this Napoleon fellow was always making trouble. And the headaches and confusion got worse. In 1800, he went mad, and his mind cleared wonderfully. He knew that he was Tom O'Bedlam. He wondered what had become of Nick and Philip the ghost. When he asked the people around him, they looked away sadly.

Later still, as he lay in his bed, very tired, the royal barber came in. He hadn't asked for a haircut. The barber's face glowed like the pale moon beneath his powdered wig, and he held a pair of bent shears which had a vaguely disagreeable smell.

Something like a headless centaur tried to nudge its way into the chamber. But it was burdened with old shoes.

"Time for your final trim, Majesty," the barber said. "It is due and overdue."

But the king, who now knew that he was Tom, reached under his pillow and removed a worn leather box. He opened it and took out a small yellow jar, caught the stopper painfully in his rotted teeth, and opened the jar.

"My aching feet!" Cousin Snip moaned. "You can't imagine what it is like walking century after century, trying to catch up with you!"

Tom had to admit that he couldn't.

* * *

Yellow flames roared in the darkness. Something thundered overhead in the night like a million angry bees. The ground shook. Walls and towers crumbled. Roofs fell in on themselves.

Tom shouted for Nick and Nick shouted for Tom, and they found each other in the thundering streets of London, in the terrible year of 1940. They ran, staggering from the shock of the explosions, driven this way by fire, that way by falling bricks and stones. Sometimes Philip the ghost was with them. Sometimes he was lost in the smoke. Once Tom looked up and saw St. Paul's luridly aglow from the flames around it, and he realized, sadly, that there were times when mere madness would not suffice, and that this was one of them.

"I have you at last!" shrieked Cousin Snip from above, hurling down on them astride a bomb.

Tom opened the final, smoky jar.

"This way!" said Philip the ghost. There was a door in the air.

The bomb exploded where they had been standing.

Tom had a glimpse from a distance of a large, tumble-down house atop a cliff, lights glaring from its windows like eyes in the night. And he saw a wooden sign swinging over a door. The sign read: YE LASTE RESORT, or, INN OF INIQUITIES (Vacancy).

Then he was inside, in a dark room thick with a friendly smell of ale and beef and fireplace smoke.

Nick was with him, and Philip the ghost drifted off the floor and shimmered beneath the ceiling.

"I suppose being a ghost is a little like being mad," Philip was saying, "for I have come to see things few ordinary folk do."

The room came into being around them, lights, voices, until Tom recognized it as the common room, like that of many an inn he had known from King Harry's time. Lanterns and dried herbs hung from the rafters. People in all manner of strange garb sat huddled in booths in dark corners.

A woman came to welcome them, bearing a tray with cups on it. She wore a long black gown with stars in it — real stars, Tom realized, not jewels or sequins — as if she had covered herself with a piece of the sky. The comb in her hair was the crescent Moon.

Tom took a cup, and so did Nick, and Philip did, too, although his cup was empty. He drank from it anyway. The wine was cool and sweet. It seemed to make Tom lose any sense of time. He felt like he had already been here for a long while.

"Welcome to my house," the hostess said. "I am Auntie Hecate."

Nick gulped. "Not —?"

"Gracious, no!" she laughed. "Just a relative."

"Lady," said Tom, bowing.

"Pray you, take a seat, friends, and you shall find what you desire."

She directed them to a booth behind a curtain.

There was already someone sitting across the table from them. Tom could just make out the huge, rounded hulk of a man with a thick beard and a broad, floppy hat.

"Argh," the stranger said.

"Argh," Tom sighed.

"Argh?" Nick ventured.

Philip merely glowed, looking bewildered.

"Be ye *pirates* then, matey?" the huge man said, thumping a fist on the tabletop. His beard distinctly rattled as he leaned forward.

He opened the little door on a lantern set on the table, and then there was enough light for Tom to see him — a gigantic, round-faced fellow, going to age and fat, with gleaming jewels set in his matted, tangled beard, an eyepatch, a grapeshot embedded in his forehead like the third eye of an idol, and a soiled skull and crossbones sewn into the brim of his hat.

Parrots sat on either shoulder. Startled by the light, they began squawking.

"Awk! Awk!"

"Pieces of eight!"

"Awk! Awk!"

"And occasional pieces of nine!"

"Argh!" the man said, shaking his beard noisily from side to side. The parrots fell to the floor with twin thuds.

Nick leaned over for a look.

"They're dead."

"Merely restin'," said the pirate. "*Argh.* Ye just can't get good parrots anymore. I ought to know, matey. Argh . . ."

"Argh?" said Tom.

"That's it. *Argh.* Me brother Nollin and me, we was pirates, we was, pillaging and looting, looting and pillaging, all across the seven seas. We didn't have any trouble none, neither . . . argh . . . not until we came to the eighth sea, which is the Salt Sea, which is where the Dead Sea went when it died. 'Twas entirely of salt, it was, without a speck of water remaining, and the ship was caught between terrible great bergs of salt, and before and behind was only a sea of powdery salt, as far as you could see, shipmate, see? Argh . . ."

"Indubitably argh," said Tom.

"*Argh* . . . I ordered the crew to make snowshoes for themselves out of pieces of the sails, which we wouldn't be needing no more. And we set out, but the salt got through anyway, and it petrifacted 'em one and all, but for me . . . *argh* . . ."

"Argh?" said Philip the ghost, drifting down to take a seat. His voice was so soft his *argh* sounded like a chirp.

"*Argh!* 'Twas me grog what saved me. I was so full of grog I was pickled

and petrifacted already, so a little salt didn't harm me none. Argh! All for me grog!"

He heaved an earthen jug onto the table, and the cork flew out like a musket shot. The pirate took a long swig, belched, and wiped his lips with his hand, then ran his fingers through his beard, pausing to caress what must have been particularly favorite jewels. He slammed the jug down again, and little blue flames danced out of the mouth of it.

"*Argh!* The whole secret of pirating, matey, is gettin' first-rate grog. Now if me crew had but indulged themselves a bit more —"

He reached under the table and got out a large wicker box, opened it, and started placing what looked like little plaster statues on the tabletop.

"*Argh!* Here they be, me brother Nollin, and me first mate — he was a wicked soul — and the rest of 'em. Argh! Fine pirates all, shrunk down to the salt in their bones. Now, matey, I was in a desperate way when this had happened, all the navies of the world being out to hang me, and me ship stuck amidst the saltbergs — so here I came, to the Last Resort, as a last resort, sort of, walking across the Salt Sea, fearful that the grog supply would run out, with me crew all in this here box."

"You carried them all?" Nick said.

"They were such a grand lot. Seemed like a shame to throw 'em away. Argh."

"A sad story," said Tom. "Argh."

"Argh! There be sad stories, matey, and there be happy ones, and I'll hear no more of the sad ones. We be not here forever, lad, no, not even at the Last Resort longer than a single night, so we might as well have a good time of it." The pirate leaned out of the booth and called, "Avast ye dog! Fill me shipmates' cups! Argh!"

And a slouching waiter came, a thing with the face of a black dog, bearing another jug. The pirate took all the cups, and when the waiter had gone, began to pour the sizzling, smoking grog for Tom and Nick, and just a little for Philip, just in case.

The ghost tried to drink, but the grog went through him and burned a hole in the tabletop. The rest of them drank heartily, and all of them told stories — even Philip told a few, in his tiny, gentle voice. Glad and mad stories they were, Tom's tales of his visions, of Nephren-Ka the Black Pharaoh, of the Autumn King in his palace of leaves, of London crocodiles, of being turned into a goose by the King of Elves, of the ice giant with his burning blue nose, which Tom had removed — and of all the other strange folk and creatures and places he had known in his madness. And Nick told how he had *not* been mad for a long, terrible while until Tom, in his generosity, in his kindness, had made him so.

And they drank more grog, and the jugs and the cups flamed blue, and Nick was weeping with gratitude, and before long Tom was weeping, and even the pirate's beard glistened with an occasional tear, for the sheer beauty

of such a story. The ghost could not weep, but merely listened, as if he were experiencing life for the first time and eager to learn each new thing.

The fireplace suffused the room with gentle heat, and the grog made it seem warmer, and there was something funny about the light. Sometimes the flames from the lamp were as blue as those from the grog, and sometimes all the room was filled with a pale blue glow. But this room, this booth, was a very good place to be, and Tom knew he wanted to remain there forever, swapping stories with the friendly pirate. It was hard to remember having been anywhere else. He looked at the salt statuettes of the pirate crew, and it seemed, in the haze of his madness and the grog, that they were alive again and listening to the stories, and that they had grown mellow and silent with the hours, with the good fellowship, and with the grog.

And blearily he watched a procession of rats make their way slowly across the tabletop, dragging a tiny hearse, the rat-knights marching alongside in solemn step, in armor of silver foil, with sharpened spoons for halberds. The rat-king lay inside the hearse, stiff and still, his signet-ring crown over his snout, his finger-bone scepter still clutched in his stiff little paws.

"Alas, alas," the rats mourned. "Alas, for our king, who was promised a fine meal, but was cheated out of it and starved to death waiting. Alas, alas . . ."

Nick drank another cup of grog and looked down at the rats, his head swaying from side to side.

"That's very sad. Alas."

"Argh . . ." said the pirate.

"But remember," said the rats, *"remember that you have an appointment, which is long since due and overdue, overworked and overwalked!"*

"Awk!" said Tom, falling off the bench, through the curtain, into the common room.

Suddenly the inn was dark and silent, and a cold wind blew through it. Stars began to come out.

Auntie Hecate was there, the comb in her hair glowing, the pale crescent Moon. The stars of her gown flowed into the sky.

"There is a gentleman caller for you, Thomas of Bedlam, who cannot be denied, even in my establishment."

The warmth of the grog left him, and Tom felt only cold terror. He turned away and staggered groping through the darkness.

Then a meaty hand caught him by the front of his shirt and dragged him over the tabletop, scattering salt statuettes.

"*Argh*, matey," said Hilan Rattlebeard, "no pirate ever runs away from a fight. Ye can run and ye can run, but there be a time when ye has to stop running, and turn and give 'em yer full broadside. Let the grog fortify ye, and ammunate ye, and petrifact ye, but, *argh*, there was never no pirate what got courage from a bottle of grog when he didn't have no courage to begin with."

"Argh!" said Tom. "That's like being mad!"

"Aye, matey, 'tis. So go out there and do what ye has to do, and the Divil take the foremost, or hindmost, or innermost, or hitching post — or whatever it is. Argh! Me and yer friends will figure it out while ye're gone. Argh!"

"Yes, *argh*!" said Tom, fiercely inspired. The pirate let go of him, and he rose proudly and walked out of the booth, onto a barren plain beneath a midnight sky.

And the crescent Moon became the full, pale, mottled moon, became a face which began to sing with a voice like a frigid wind from out of the grave; and the familiar figure loomed over Tom, tall and terrible, his bloody cloak mere scraps and tatters over his bones now, the shears in his hand no more than a charred, twisted mass of metal. Behind, one centaur-thing waited, completely covered, dragging masses of old shoes, its dangling head aglow like a one-eyed jack-o'-lantern in the darkness.

"Look at them! My lovely shears! Ruined!" Cousin Snip threw the wreckage at Tom's feet.

Tom swayed with the weight of the grog in him, but he did not hesitate. " 'Tis a piteous shame, cos'. Could ye learn a new trade, then? A scarecrow? Ye'd be a natural as a scarecrow . . ."

"No! No! No!" screamed Cousin Snip, stamping his feet furiously.

The shoes the specter wore were old and dirty. Bony toes showed through. Tom remembered having many a pair like that, and somehow, looking at them, he knew that some great mystery was revealed. He knew, too, that the shoes were important somehow. The grog and his own madness mixed together to tell him that.

"You don't know how *hard* it has been for me," whined Cousin Snip, "tramping to and fro on the Earth and up and down in it, chasing you across the centuries. Look! Look! I still have the appointment book!"

Indeed he did, and Tom's and Nick's names still glowed on the gravestone page.

"You deserve a rest. Why not just forget the whole thing? Retire."

"*I can't!* My duty! *Enough* is *enough*. You and Nicholas are *still* unsnipped, and I can't go back until I have you both. You've *ruined* my shears, so maybe I'll use a file, a knife, or my teeth this time, which is *so* undignified. Me, an age-old specter and terror of repute, favorably listed in *Who's Who in Phantasms and Horrors*, gnawing through your life's thread with my *teeth*! Oh the shame and the infamy of it! Oh the pity and the spectacle! Now will you *please*, at last, out of common *decency*, just come along quietly?"

"Of course," said Tom. "That seems the reasonable thing."

Cousin Snip rattled to his knees, folding his skeletal hands. *"Oh, thank you! Thank you!"*

"On one condition."

"What?"

"Not to change the subject, but I want you to answer a question."

Meanwhile, the centaur-thing lumbered forward, dragging thousands upon thousands of shoes, leaving a trail behind him, as the strings broke one by one.

"Yes, yes! What do you want?"

Tom's madness and the grog worked and blended together; they were naturally complimentary, and they drove Tom on. Perhaps the inspiring example of Captain Rattlebeard, too, did its part, when Tom asked what he asked. "What are all the shoes for?"

Cousin Snip stood up and loomed again as impressively as a thoroughly exhausted specter could loom. His bones shook and clattered.

"Don't you *know*? Fiend! Brute! Ingrate! After all the trouble I have gone through on your behalf to settle your account, to account for you in the hereafter. You wrecked my carriage long ago, so I've had to *walk* all this distance through all these centuries, never stopping to rest, because you were *due and overdue*. You don't think I did that on just *two* feet did you?"

Tom's courage did not fail him. Still he asked, "You have more?"

"Yes! That is how we, all of us, range as far and wide as we do. If I have to snip somebody in Aleppo and then I have an appointment in Samarra the next day, *how* do you think I manage all that traveling?"

Tom *laughed*. "Naw! Even I can't believe that, and I'm mad. You'll have to show me!"

"Very well, then," Cousin Snip sighed, "if it means you'll come along without any fuss."

"Yes. Then my life would be complete," said Tom calmly.

Cousin Snip wearily signaled his surviving attendant, and the centaur-thing came over, set his head down carefully, and began to put shoes on his master's feet, on one pair, then another, then another, and another, backing away as he did, until he and the shoes and the feet had passed far away, over a rolling hill, toward the horizon, and Cousin Snip stretched as far as the eye could see, like a super-centipede, feet, feet, and more feet, a millipede, a billipede, with all those feet and all those shoes worn through from tramping down the centuries.

Tom walked alongside for about a quarter of a mile, then said, "Oh rare marvel! Oh wonder!"

With a rumble, Cousin Snip curved the front of his huge body around to look.

"What is so rare and marvelous?"

"I just wonder —"

"You wonder too much, you irritating little man."

At this point the madness and the grog and Tom's courage blended sublimely and wrought the supreme miracle.

"What I wonder is . . . well, how do you *work* all these legs?" Tom rapped a bony kneecap with his knuckles, then another, then another. "Forsooth,

how do you *remember* whether *this* one moves *before* or *after* this one here? And then, can you be sure that you shouldn't have moved *this* one in the middle first? It must be very confusing."

"I never *thought* of it," said Cousin Snip angrily. "I just do it."

"Well, think on it then, for 'tis a wondrous marvel and deserves to be appreciated." He rapped more kneecaps. "Faith, do you move this one, this one, and this one, or that one, that one, and that one, without getting them all muddled up?"

"Stop it! Stop it!" Cousin Snip screamed. He tried to whip his body around and charge Tom, but all his legs were quickly tangled, and he was left wriggling and writhing on the ground, like a huge worm draped over hill and valley, as far as the eye could see, and farther still. Somewhere, at the far end, the centaur-thing was probably still putting shoes on.

"Oh wondrous rare," said Tom. "Argh."

"You promised!"

"Alas," said Tom, "my mind's distracted, and I cannot recall what it was that I promised. Pray forgive me, and pity poor mad Tom."

Then Tom came back to the inn, and Nick and Philip and Rattlebeard the pirate had many a laugh over his tale, and they drank more grog until Tom could no longer feel the stuff going down and was sure that he had become, as the pirate expressed it, petrifacted.

But then Auntie Hecate came to them and said, "Hurry up, please. It's time."

"Argh," the pirate said softly as he began to gather his salty crew back into the wicker crate. He scooped his two parrots up off the floor and tried to put them back on his shoulders, but they were still resting, so he stuffed them in his pockets.

"Time for what?" Nick demanded of no one in particular.

Tom sat back, staring into his flaming grog, detached from it all.

"Closing time," the hostess said. "You have to go. This is the Last Resort, and you can only come here once. Then you must move on."

"I think I'll go into trade," the pirate said, muttering to himself. "Argh, me an honest tradesman. The shame of it! But 'tis a good way to hide until the navies lose interest. Argh. I think I'll make molds of me shipmates here, poke holes in their heads, and sell 'em as saltshakers. But never say die. Never give up. Ye can't run away forever. Argh. Be brave and think of pillagin' something. 'Tis the pirate way. Argh!"

And without another word he took up his box and his jug of grog, and he paused only to pry the cork out of the ceiling with a dagger (where it had gone like a musket shot) before staggering into the common room. Tom and Nick and Philip the ghost followed.

They had to go, Tom knew. In the supreme clarity of his madness and the awesome quantities of the awesome grog, he knew, too, that even the happi-

est moments are fleeting, that any victory is only for a while, and that even the finest company must finally part. He knew that Cousin Snip or some other of his tribe would eventually catch up with him, with Nick, and with Captain Rattlebeard. But he knew, too, that he could still have happy moments and adventures, filling his life as the grog jug remained inexhaustibly full — and he concluded many more vastly profound thoughts at that point, then lost them again in the warm haze of grog.

Auntie Hecate was waiting for them by a single door. She held a candle, which burned low.

Tom went to open the door.

"No!" she said. "That's the door to Hell."

Tom staggered back, but seven blue devils came, spitting blue sparks and snapping their tails in the air. The door opened of its own accord, and they dove through, into billowing flame.

When the dazzlement had faded from Tom's eyes, he saw Philip the ghost drift through the open door. Beyond was only darkness.

Auntie Hecate closed the door behind him, and when she opened it again, salt spray splashed out onto the floor.

"That's the door to the seven seas," said Captain Rattlebeard. "Argh." He hefted his wicker case and his jug. "I hope the waters will do me crew some good."

And he was gone.

Then Tom and Nick waited until the door became the door to England. Tom watched as, at first, blue-painted savages drove chariots across the good green hills. Then Roman legions came and built cities, and more savages, who burnt the cities, and men in armor, and there were castles. At last he saw the London he knew, and there was King Harry himself riding in stately procession in his carriage, with guardsmen before and behind.

"Through you go!" said Auntie Hecate, and she gave them both a firm shove.

Tom stumbled and staggered. All around him people shouted. The sunlight was too much for his eyes. He fell down, hands over his face.

Then rough hands hauled him up, and he saw the king's men with their pikes, and he saw that they had seized Nick, too. The king's coach had stopped a short distance away. Hundreds of people lined the streets and leaned out of windows, staring, amazed.

" 'Tis a flogging for ye for blocking the king's royal progress!"

"And maybe more!"

Tom tried to explain. There was still enough of the grog in him for everything to seem so clear. If only he could make them understand. He tried to tell them of the Blessed Isles, and how, through the centuries, he had been king of England himself until he regained his madness over two hundred years hence. He told them about the dreaded Snip, and all the rest.

Then the king himself, Harry the Eighth, stormed out of his carriage, shoved the guards aside, and said, " 'Sblood ye fools! Let the poor lunatics alone! Can't ye see they're completely out of their heads?"

And as Tom felt himself lifted gently and deposited in a doorway and the king's carriage rattled by, he knew for certain, with the fleeting clarity of the grog, that there was no better way to be than mad.

He had a gold coin in his hand. He didn't know where it had come from.

NEMESIS

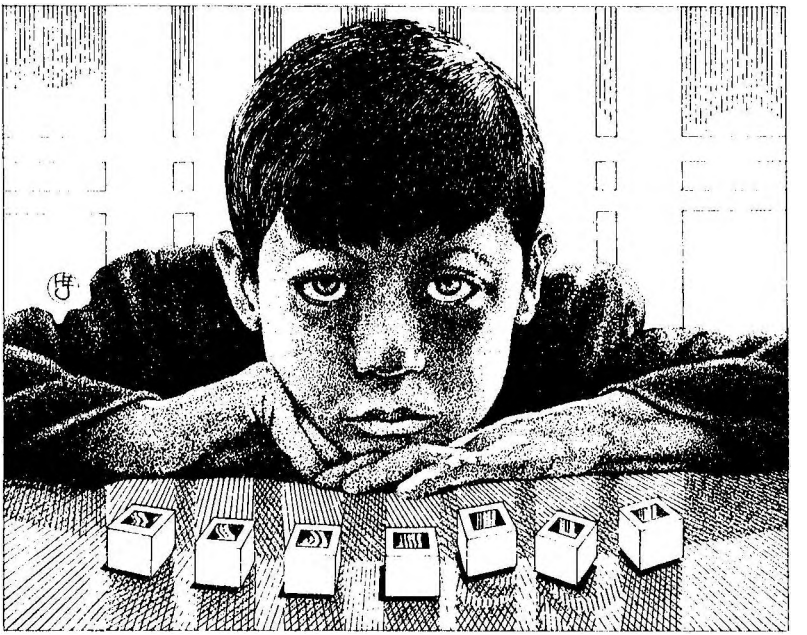
It lurks in the deep.
It skulks in the dark.
Faceless and shapeless it
slides through the park, oozing
through gutter, sewer and street,
through ghetto aclutter with vermin to
eat. It grows very slowly, but surely it
grows, waxing in strength, in power and ken,
knowing as yet it is no match for men.
Doesn't know pain. Never draws breath;
just flows through the city on a
journey of death. Learning so
slowly through eons and
ages, yet storing
more knowledge
than savants
and sages.
Almost it's
ready; soon
comes the
day.
Beware
all you
proud
ones,
for
man
is
passé.

— Morris Liebson

THE EGG

by Andrew Weiner

art: Hank Jankus



Andrew Weiner's first novel, Station Gehenna, *was recently published (September 1987) by Congdon & Weed as part of their "Isaac Asimov Presents" series. Weiner has other stories forthcoming in* The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction *and* Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine. *He made an earlier appearance in* Amazing® Stories *with "Fake-out" (November 1987).*

Kids! Grow your own robots! Exciting and educational! No batteries required. Rush $19.95 to Robo-Bobo Electric Labs. Money back if not completely delighted. Here's how to order!

"I don't believe it," Hugh Grant said. "I don't believe you let him spend his money on junk like this."

"It's his money," Lena Grant said. "It came out of his allowance."

"Which is far too big if you ask me. When I was his age . . ."

"He gets less than most of his friends. He saved up for weeks. . . ."

"For that? For *that*? I'm sorry, this is really too much. Kids today have no appreciation for the value of money. And as for the people who sold it to him, I'm just disgusted. Preying on helpless little kids . . ."

He glared at the object on the coffee table in front of him. It was a dark green metal box, rectangular in shape, about six inches long and three inches wide and deep. Set into the top of the box were a series of glass panels, each about an inch square, that glowed softly in the light from the living-room lamps.

"$19.95," he said. "And for what? A robot egg. Can you believe the nerve of these people?"

"It's his money," she said, again. "He has to learn to make his own mistakes."

"I'm going to report this. This is out-and-out mail fraud. Peddling robot eggs to little kids in the back of comic books . . ."

"It's supposed to be solar-powered," she said.

"Oh sure. Sure it is."

"Maybe it's Japanese. They do some very clever things."

She picked up the box and examined it for imprints. It felt slightly warm to the touch. She shook her head. "No trademark," she said.

"Robot eggs. There must be a law. . . ."

INSTRUCTIONS FOR TENDING YOUR ROBOT EGG

Place egg in sunlight, preferably a southern exposure. Observe its stages of development. To get full educational value from your Robo-Bobo Robot Egg, take careful notes.

First stage of growth: ***incubation.***

Your robotlings will require an incubation period before emerging from the egg. Incubation period may vary depending on length of daylight, cloud cover, and the altitude of the sun.

Jimmy Grant kept the robot egg in his bedroom, on the ledge of the big south-facing window.

It had been a close-run thing, with only his mother's intercession stopping his father from dumping it in the garbage. But after the initial furor

had died down, as Jimmy had known it would, his father had not mentioned the egg again.

At the age of ten, Jimmy was wise enough in the ways of family politics not to flaunt his victory.

Every day when he got home from school, he rushed up to his room to check on the egg. He was sure that it felt warmer and warmer to the touch. But that could just be the result of the lengthening of the days that signalled the approach of summer vacation.

When a week had gone by without visible change, he began to wonder whether his father might not have been right. Certainly there had been disappointments in the past: the 144 World War Two paratroopers who had turned out to be less than an inch high; the intergalactic radio that had seized up after several days of uninteresting hissing.

But the detailed instructions leaflet that had accompanied the egg gave him grounds for continued hope. *Incubation period may vary depending on . . . the altitude of the sun.* A nice, reassuringly scientific touch. The people at Robo-Bobo Electric Labs obviously knew their stuff. Although where *were* the Robo-Bobo Electric Labs? The P.O. Box number on the advertisement had been in Union, New Jersey, but somehow Jimmy envisioned a gleaming white installation in Silicon Valley.

Finally, his faith proved justified. Just two weeks to the day after the package had arrived, the egg began to open. Just a crack at first, not enough to see inside. But slowly, slowly, fraction by painful fraction, the upper surface of the egg began to lift itself up, just like a lid.

Second stage: ***orientation.***
As the egg begins to hatch, you will see the little robotlings nestled inside. Expect a period of orientation while they get their bearings. Robotlings will not emerge until the lid of the egg is all the way up.

"Neat," said Lena Grant, staring at the box on Jimmy's window ledge.

"Cute," said Hugh Grant. "Too cute."

"At least it opened," she said. "At least it did *something* for his $19.95."

The lid of the box was open at an angle of 45°. Inside, nestled within an inner layer of what looked like aluminum foil, were six identical little cubes, each about an inch square. They were the same dark green color as the box, and each had a tiny glass panel inset like those on the lid of the box.

"What's so wonderful about that?" Hugh Grant asked. "I'm sure it's just some simple time-release mechanism. Probably an elastic band or something. Unless he opened it himself."

"I did not," Jimmy said.

"Anyway, what's inside isn't so terrific. I mean, they're just *sitting* there."

"They're getting their bearings," Jimmy said. "That's what it says in the instructions."

"Sure," Hugh Grant said. "Sure."

Third stage: ***mobility.***
Watch as your robotlings use stored solar energy to show voluntary mobility, crossing greater and greater distances.

After dinner, Jimmy asked permission to go upstairs. It was unspoken, but it was clear that he wanted to check on his robotlings.

"It isn't healthy," Hugh said, after permission had grudgingly been granted and Jimmy had raced away, "spending all that time up there staring at those things. Perhaps we should have had another child, someone for him to play with. . . ."

"It's just a phase," Lena said. "He'll grow out of it. And you didn't want a second child either. Anyway, only children aren't lonely children. Didn't you see the *Times* magazine this weekend?"

"I don't know —" he began, but was interrupted by Jimmy pounding down the stairs.

"They moved," Jimmy shouted, triumphant. "I just went to the bathroom, and when I came back again, they had moved."

He raced up the stairs again, trailed by his parents.

The robot egg still stood on Jimmy's window ledge. The lid was now open at a 90° angle. Two of the cubes were missing. They were sitting on the window ledge about a foot from the box, quite stationary.

Hugh picked one up and examined it. Underneath it were tiny wheels. It felt somewhat warm to the touch.

"Hmmm," he said. "Hmmm."

"He moved them himself," Hugh said later, after Jimmy had gone unwillingly to sleep. "This is beginning to worry me. Perhaps we should talk to the school psychologist about this. He never lied before."

"Yes, he did," Lena said. "But even if he's lying now, you're making a mountain out of a molehill. And perhaps they *did* move by themselves. Perhaps they have batteries inside, or something."

"Sure," Hugh said. "Sure."

As Hugh climbed out of the car the next evening, he trod on something hard that bruised the sole of his foot and caused him to stumble, only just stopping himself from falling.

Swearing under his breath, he bent to pick it up. It was one of Jimmy's robotlings, apparently undamaged by the impact.

"Jimmy," he called, as he limped furiously into the house, clutching the robotling in one hand and his briefcase in the other. "Jimmy, where the hell are you?"

No response.

"Where's Jimmy?" he asked his wife as she came to greet him. "I nearly broke my foot stepping on one of his damned robot things."

"He isn't home yet. Thursday is violin practise."

"Well I'm going to have a word with him when he does get home."

He put the robotling down on the dining-room table.

"It was out on the driveway?" Lena asked. "That's funny. I could have sworn they were all in his room this morning."

"Come on," he said impatiently. "He must have sneaked it out."

"But that was after he left for school."

"Sure. And pigs can fly."

He scowled down at the robotling on the dining-room table. He blinked. The robotling was perched precariously at the very edge of the table. He moved it into the middle.

"Funny . . ." he said.

"What?"

"Nothing."

Jimmy insisted that he had not put the robotling in the driveway.

"That's the third stage, dad. The third stage of development. First incubation, then orientation, then voluntary mobility, covering greater and greater distances."

"And what's the fourth stage?" Lena asked.

Jimmy smiled secretively.

"I can't tell you," he said. "You have to be a member of the Robo-Bobo League. And to do that you have to buy your own egg."

"Answer your mother," Hugh said.

"Can't," Jimmy said stubbornly.

"Answer her," Hugh said, a threatening tone in his voice. "I want to hear it, too. Because if the fourth stage is having one of your robots set fire to the house . . ."

"It isn't setting fire to the house. It isn't anything like that."

"Well, what is it then?"

"I can't tell you," Jimmy said, tears welling up his eyes. "I swore that I wouldn't."

"Go to your room," Hugh said. "Right now."

Fourth stage: ***growth.***

Once mobile, robotlings will grow rapidly, up to twelve times their original size. Growth rate and final size depend on availability of sunlight.

Lena was in the kitchen, emptying the dishwasher. She heard a strange whirring sound behind her.

"Jimmy?" she said as she turned around, knowing that neither Jimmy nor her husband should be home for hours yet.

She screamed. The plate that was in her hands slipped through her fingers and shattered on the ceramic tile floor.

It was a robotling, wheeling slowly, slowly toward her, its inset glass panel flashing in the bright sunlight that streamed through the kitchen window.

As she watched, the robotling came to a halt against the cupboard under the window and sat there, apparently drinking in the sun.

So Jimmy had been right. But it was not only because the robotling had moved that Lena had screamed. The other really frightening thing about it was that the robotling had *grown*. It was ten times the size it had been when she had last seen Jimmy's flock, just the day before.

Fifth stage: ***reproduction.***
Soon after attaining full size, robots will lay their own eggs, and the cycle begins again.

"These things have got to go," Hugh told Jimmy, firmly. "Now. Before they get so big they won't go through the front door."

"They won't get any bigger. They're full size right now. That was the fourth stage I couldn't tell you about until it happened. Growth."

"And what's the fifth stage? Reproduction? The patter of tiny robotlings?"

Jimmy said nothing, but his face told the whole story.

"I'm right, aren't I? I can tell just by looking at you, although I can hardly believe it. But that's insane, that's just insane. It contradicts everything I know about science. But then again, what do I know about science? I'm just a chartered accountant. I don't even understand pocket calculators. Self-reproducing robots. . . . Can you imagine the technology behind all that? How could they afford to sell it for $19.95? And why would they sell it to kids?"

"They're toys," Lena said, a little dubiously. "Just toys."

"Toys or not, they have to go. Can you imagine what would happen if they *did* reproduce? There'd be hundreds of the things, swarming all over the neighborhood. We'd never hear the last of it."

He pulled a garbage bag out of the kitchen cupboard and reached for the robotling on the floor. It began to wheel away from him, but he grabbed it easily enough.

"They're weaker at night," Jimmy said, as his father thrust the robotling into the garbage bag. "After the sun goes down. The electric light isn't strong enough. And when you turn off the lights, they don't move at all."

The robotling in the garbage bag struggled slightly, then subsided.

"It'll stay dead," Jimmy said, "until it gets more light."

"Good."

Hugh rushed through the house, gathering up robotlings and pushing them into the bag.

Jimmy trailed behind his father, observing the fate of his toys. In a sense, although he would never have admitted it, he was a little relieved. Reading the instructions, that was one thing, but seeing it all happen, stage by stage . . . it *was* a little weird and scary.

"I could only find five of the little buggers," Hugh told Lena as he completed his circuit. "One of them must be hiding, but I'll find it."

He stormed out into the yard and thrust the garbage bag into a can, slamming the lid shut.

"Well," he said. "That takes care of *that*. Or almost."

"I can't say I'm sorry," Lena said.

She turned to her son. "And you, young man, have to go to bed."

Jimmy went obediently to bed. But he did not go to sleep easily that night. He lay awake, wrestling with an agonizing dilemma.

Should he have told his father, he wondered, about the *sixth* stage? As a member of the Robo-Bobo League, he was sworn to secrecy, and violating his oath could lead to instant expulsion. And yet . . . somehow he had never really expected that matters would come to this pass, never really believed that Robo-Bobo Electric Labs were *serious* about the sixth stage. Now he was not so sure.

Sixth stage: ***world conquest.***
Once sufficient numbers are reached, robots will set out on a merciless plan of world conquest, sparing only members of the Robo-Bobo League from their iron rule.

At dawn, Hugh was awakened by the clatter of a garbage can in the yard.

"Those damn raccoons," he said.

Lena slept on beside him.

He got up and pulled on his dressing gown and opened the bedroom door.

A robotling wheeled toward him across the landing.

The one I missed, he thought.

And then he saw the other five scuttling along behind it. They came to a halt at his feet, lining up in a row with almost military precision.

It let them out, he thought. Well, this time, I'm not going to miss any of them.

And then, one by one, the front panels of each of the robots slid back. And from each of the robots projected a pencil-sized tube, hardly three inches long.

"What the hell?" Hugh said.

Six tiny but impossibly fierce beams of light flashed up at him, drilling a series of tiny but fatal holes through his brain.

QUESTIONS FOR HOME STUDY

1. Why is sunlight necessary to hatch your robot egg?

2. Keep a record of hours of sunlight per day. How long does your egg take to hatch?

3. Would your egg take longer or shorter to hatch if it lived on Titan, a satellite of the planet Saturn? Give reasons for your answer.

4. Keep a record of average daily mobility of your robotlings. Plot your findings on a graph.

5. Keep records of average daily growth of your robotlings. Plot your findings on a graph.

6. Name some characteristics of living things. Are your robotlings alive? Give reasons for your answers.

7. If each robot egg contains six robotlings, and if each robotling lays twelve eggs per year, how long would it take to have a million robotlings?

8. If you started out with ten thousand eggs, how many robotlings would you have after one year?

9. What additional characteristics would your robotlings need to develop in order to conquer the world? Give reasons for your answer.

10. Is there brighter sunlight on the planet Earth or on Titan? Which place do you think robotlings would prefer? Explain why.

11. Why might robotlings want to conquer the world? Give reasons for your answer.

THE ASTRONOMER EXPLORES THE CATHEDRAL OF THE ATOM

Impregnable and darkly gothic
it's frozen in those weak fields like
the stone above Magritte's sea

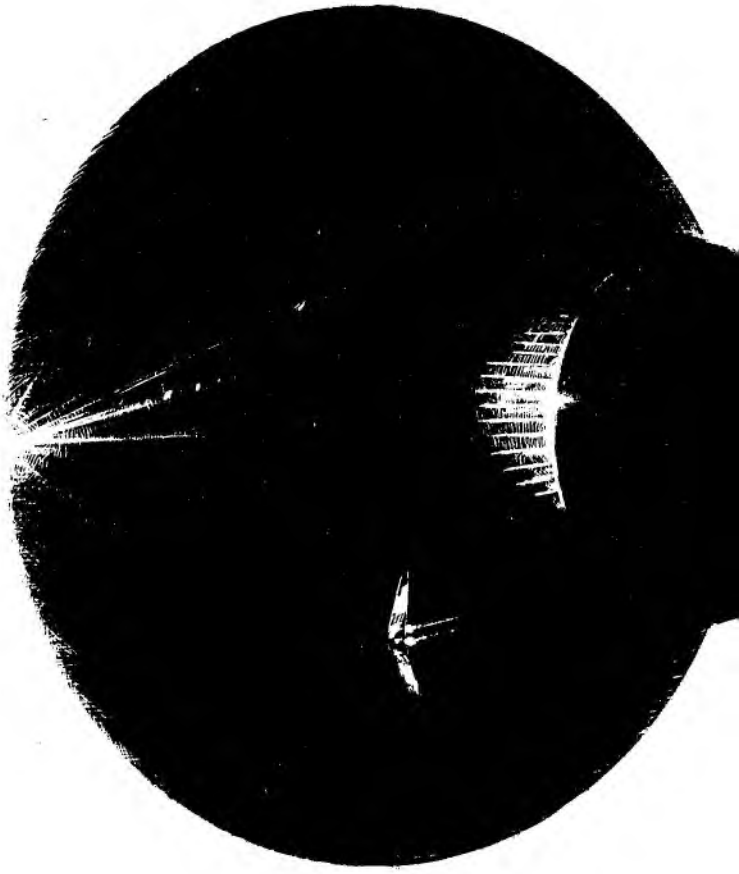
Freed from deeper attractions
its gargoyles spin about the heights
and bond with other realms

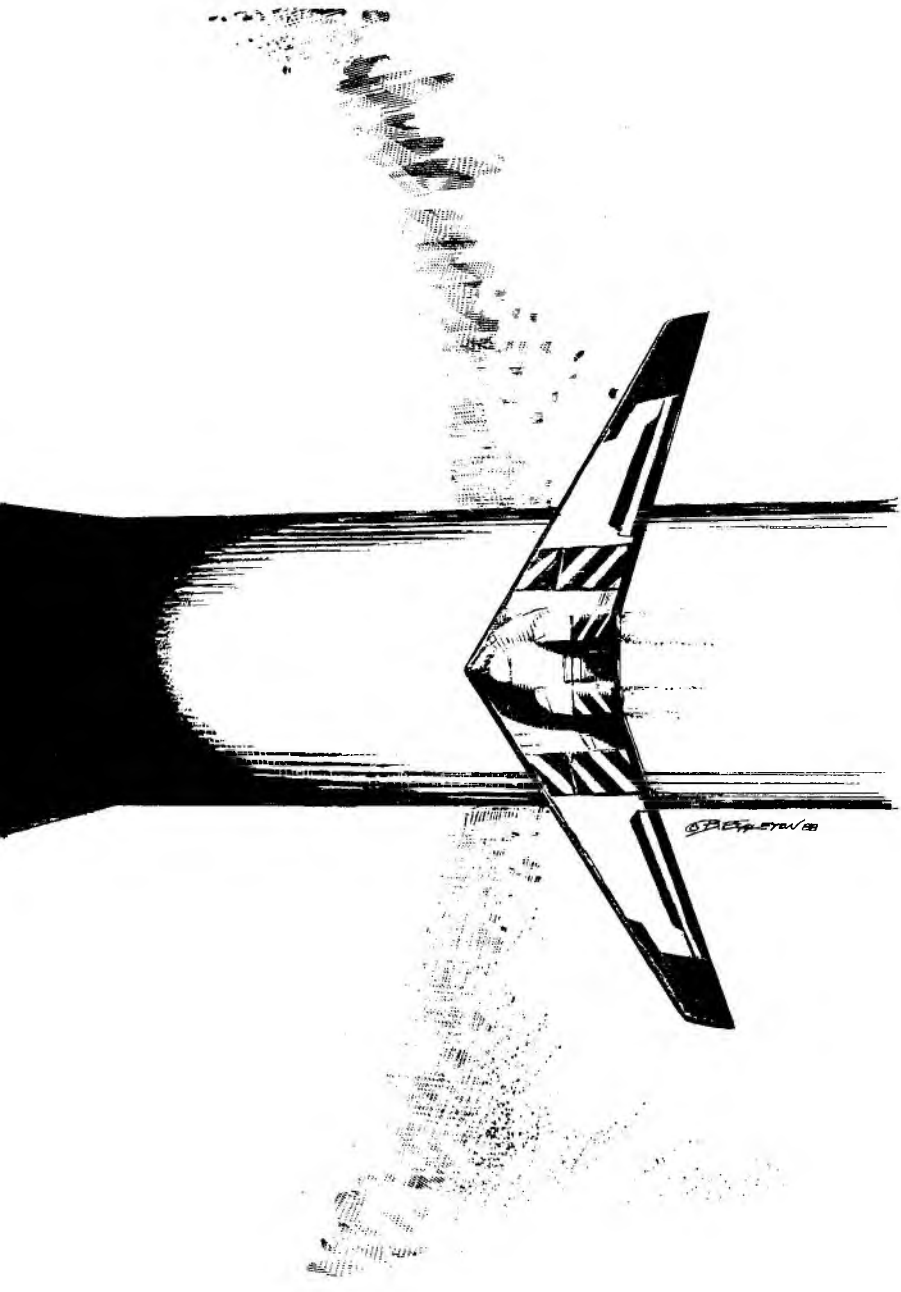
Locked in the rose pattern of
its window is the mystery that unifies
all forces all love under one god

— Robert Frazier

GOLDEN FLEECE

by Robert J. Sawyer
art: Bob Eggleton





Looking for a new and exciting career?

The United Nations Space Agency
Requires
Experts in All Fields
for
First Extrasolar Planetary Survey

We require 10,000 people to form the crew of *Argo,* first in UNSA's Starcology (space-traveling arcology) series of Bussard-ramjet starships. Starcology *Argo* will conduct a complete survey of Eta Cephei IV ("Colchis"), a verdant, Earth-like world 46 light-years distant. True to the Starcology community-in-space idea, we will consider workers in all realms of human endeavor. [R]eply to this posting, and an application will be downloaded to your terminal.

I love that they trusted me blindly. So what if it was ship's night? For centuries, astronomers had worked while others slept, and even if there was no way to see outside during our long voyage, Diana Chandler still hadn't broken the habit of not starting work until after I had dimmed the lights in the corridors. I'd suggested to her that she might be able to verify her startling findings by using some of the equipment stowed in the cargo holds. That no one had been down to the lower decks for almost two weeks didn't seem to bother her. That she was alone in the middle of my artificial night fazed her not in the least. After all, even with 10,000 people on board, I'm sure she felt safe as long as she was under my watchful eyes. Indeed, she seemed perfectly calm as she headed into a service corridor, its walls lined with blue-green algae behind acrylic sheets.

I'd already wiped the files that contained her calculations, so there was just one more loose end to tie up. She entered the cargo hold. Through the open-grating floor she could see level after level of storage compartments, each filled with aluminum crates.

I slid the door shut behind her. She was used to that soft pneumatic hiss, but her heart skipped a beat when it was followed by the *snick-snick* of spring-loaded locking bolts sliding into place.

"I'm sorry, Diana," I said through speakers mounted on the crisscrossing metalwork of the ceiling. All at once Di realized what was going on. She scrambled for one of the metal bars used to lever the lids of the crates open and — "Damn you, JASON!" — smashed the splayed end into my wall-mounted camera unit. Shards of glass cascaded to the floor, falling endlessly through the open gratings. Undaunted, I swiveled an overhead camera pair to look down on her. This angle foreshortened her appearance. From here

she didn't look like an entirely adequate astrophysicist, a shrewd collector of antiques, a recently separated but passionate lover, or — by all accounts — a great cook. No, from here she looked like a little girl. A very frightened little girl.

Di's wrist medical implant told me that her heart was pounding loudly enough to thunder in her ears. Still, she must have heard the electric hum of my overhead camera swiveling to track her because she turned and hurled the bar at that unit. It fell short, bouncing with a *whoomp* on the lid of a crate.

She ran on, but stopped to evaluate her alternatives when she came to a four-way intersection between rows of crates. As she stood, she fingered the tiny pewter crucifix she wore on a chain around her neck. I knew it was her mannerism when she was nervous. I knew, too, that she wore the cross not for its religious significance — her Catholicism was nothing but a field in a data base — but because it was more than 300 years old.

She decided, as I had hoped she would, to run down the aisle to her left, which meant she had to squeeze past a squat robot forklift. I set it after her, letting loose a blast from its horn. I looked at her now from the forklift's point of view. Such an attractive woman: her yellow hair separated so well from the shadows.

Suddenly, she pitched forward, tumbling onto her face. Her left foot had caught in the floor grating. I slammed the forklift's brakes, lest it crush her here. She got up, adrenaline surging, and took off down the corridor with two-meter strides.

Ahead was the hatch I'd been shepherding her toward. Di made it through into the hangar deck. She looked up, desperate. The window to the hangar control room was dark, of course: it would be six subjective years before we would arrive at Colchis, where the ships stored here would be used.

On either side of the hangar were 24 rows of silver boomerang-shaped landing craft, the nose of one ship tucked neatly into the angle of the next. Ahead was the plated wall that separated the hangar from vacuum. Diana jumped at the sound of groaning metal. The wall jerked loose in its grooves, and air started hissing out.

Di's shoulder-length hair whipped in the breeze. "No, JASON!" she shouted. "I won't say anything — I promise!" Foolish woman. Didn't she know I could tell when she was lying? A thin stripe of deadly black appeared at the bottom of the hangar's outer wall. She screamed something, but the rising roar drowned her words. She caught sight of the lander *Orpheus,* its outer air-lock door open. That's right, Diana: there's air inside. The wind fought her as she climbed the stepladder into the tiny lighted cubicle. Grabbing the manual wheel in both hands, she forced the lock to cycle. When she was safely within the body of the lander, I slid the hangar wall all the way up.

The view of the starbow was magnificent. At our near-light speed, stars

ahead had blue-shifted beyond normal visibility. Likewise, those behind had red-shifted into darkness. But encircling us was a thin rainbow band of glowing points. I fired *Orpheus*'s main engines. Diana's face was visible through the cockpit window, a death mask, as the lander darted into oblivion.

"Aaron, we have an emergency. Wake up. Wake up *now*." It was an autonomic response for me, completed before I could even think of halting it. My locator subroutine had sought out Aaron Rossman for two reasons: he was supervisor of Starcology *Argo*'s fleet of landing craft, and he had just ended a five-year marriage to Diana Chandler. Next to Aaron lay Kirsten Jorgensen, M.D., eyes closed but wide awake. She jumped at the sound of my voice and, propping herself up, shook Aaron's shoulder. Normally, I bring up the lights slowly when someone is waking up, but this was no time for gentleness. Aaron's EEG shuddered into consciousness, and I spoke again. "Get out of bed quickly."

"JASON?" He rubbed yellow crystals from his eyes. Implanted on the inside of his left wrist was my medical sensor, which doubled as a watch. He squinted at its glowing display. "You mystic! Do you know what time it is?"

"The lander *Orpheus* has just taken off," I said through speakers on the headboard. That did it. He rolled out of bed, flat feet slapping the floor, and fumbled for his pants. "There's no time to get dressed. I have an elevator waiting for you." I slid both his bedchamber and main apartment doors aside, and he ran into the corridor. Kirsten grabbed a robe and caught up to him at the entrance to the lift.

The car began its 54-level drop. The elevator itself was silent, running on linear-induction motors in a vacuum shaft. But I always whistled a descending note through my speakers when the cylindrical cabs were going down. It had started as a joke: I'd expected someone to realize that the damned things should have been silent. So far, 73 million elevator rides to my credit, no one had noticed.

Aaron looked up at my paired cameras, mounted above the elevator door. "How did it happen?"

"The ship was appropriated, for reasons unknown."

"Appropriated? By whom?"

No easy way to say this. It's too bad Kirsten had to be there. "Diana."

"Diana? *My* Diana?" Kirsten's face was blank — a carefully controlled blank — but her telemetry told me that she was stung by Aaron's use of the word *my*. "Can you contact her?"

"I'm trying, but there's too much interference from our ramfield." The elevator popped open, revealing one arm of the U-shaped hangar-deck control room. Laboring at consoles in the dim light were 27 others I had summoned, including tiny Piotr Gorlov, mayor of Starcology *Argo,* and giant I-Shin Chang, chief engineer.

Aaron peered out the observation window that ran along the inner walls of the control room, overlooking three sides of the hangar. His eyes fixed on the still-open space door. "Distance to *Orpheus*?"

"Fifty klicks," said Chang, vacating the chair in front of the main console, its cushioned seat rising ten centimeters with a pneumatic hiss.

Aaron slipped into his place and stabbed a finger at the central viewscreen, a glowing rectangle cutting the observation window into two long curving panes. "External!"

I produced a holographic rendering of Starcology *Argo*. The material part of our Bussard ramjet looked like a wide-mouthed bronze funnel. Girdling the outside of the funnel cone halfway down was the windowless ring-shaped habitat. The remainder of *Argo*'s two-kilometer length was a cylindrical shaft, ending in the bulbous fusion chamber. In front of *Argo*, I added a tiny silver angle-bracket representing the runaway lander.

"*Orpheus*'s velocity?" asked Aaron.

"63 meters per second and slowing," I said.

"She's moving perpendicular to the ramfield's magnetic lines of force, yes?" said Chang. "That's dragging her down."

"Will *Orpheus* collide with us?" asked Mayor Gorlov.

"No," I said. "My autonomic meteor-avoidance system angles the ramfield away from us whenever a metallic object enters it. Otherwise, *Orpheus* would have hurled down the funnel and destroyed our ramjet."

"We need that ship back," said Gorlov.

"That *ship*?" Aaron turned toward the little man. "What about Di?"

The mayor was 20 centimeters shorter than Aaron, but there was nothing tiny about Gorlov's voice. I often had to pass it through an equalizer to clear out distortion. "Wake up, Rossman," he bellowed. "It's suicide to enter the ramfield."

Kirsten laid a hand on Aaron's shoulder, one of those nonverbal gestures that seemed to communicate so much for them. Aaron scooped a calculator off an adjacent console, cupping it in his palm. None of my eyes could see what he was typing.

"*Orpheus*'s engines have stopped firing, yes?" asked Chang.

"Yes," I said. "All shipboard systems went dead when it entered the ramfield."

"Can we pull her back in?" asked Gorlov.

"No."

"Yes!" Aaron swung around. "By God, we can!" He handed the calculator to Chang. I zoomed in on its electroluminescent display. Damn him. . . .

Chang looked dubiously at Aaron's calculations. "I don't know . . ."

"Dammit, Wall," Aaron said. "What have we got to lose by trying?"

"JASON," Chang said at last, "angle the ramfield as Aaron has suggested, yes? Constrict it as much as possible so as to deflect *Orpheus* into the shadow cast by the ramscoop funnel."

All attention focused on my viewscreen display. As I tightened the field, its intensity increased. *Orpheus* slowed, caught in the net. Aaron brought his hand up to his shoulder, interlacing his fingers with Kirsten's. On screen, *Orpheus* started moving past the lip of the funnel. Barely at first, then with more speed, then —

"Comm laser?" asked Aaron.

"No reply from Di," I said, "and *Orpheus*'s electronics are still too scrambled for me to take remote control."

Faster. Closer.

"Once she slips into the lee of the funnel," Aaron said, "she'll be shielded from the induced cosmic rays. You should be able to fire her engines at that point."

Closer. Faster.

"Here she comes!"

"Now, JASON!"

Closer. Closer.

"Now!"

Orpheus obeyed my command. "Firing attitude-control jets." The partial pressure of CO_2 in the room rose perceptibly: everyone exhaling at once.

Aaron gestured out the observation window to the hangar deck below. "Now maneuver her back here."

Even as he spoke, the boomerang-shaped lander appeared through the open hangar door, silhouetted against the spectral light of the starbow.

The hangar-deck flooring cracked like thunder with each footstep. A spliced-together biosheeting grew here so football games could be played in the bay, but it had flash-frozen during its brief exposure to vacuum and was just beginning to warm up. Kirsten carried her medical bag as she and Aaron walked toward *Orpheus*. Both wore silvery radiation-opaque suits overtop of fluorescent orange parkas. Each had a wrist Geiger counter.

"I don't believe Di would kill herself," said Aaron, passing the forty-yard line. He walked a few paces ahead of Kirsten, presumably so he wouldn't have to meet her eyes.

"She was pissed off when you didn't renew your marriage contract."

"Weeks ago," said Aaron. "And she wasn't *that* upset."

Kirsten muttered the word *bastard* too softly for Aaron to hear. "Couldn't you see it?" she said aloud.

"See what?"

"She loved you." Aaron paused, and Kirsten caught up with him.

"Our relationship was stale."

"You got bored with her."

"Maybe."

"Wham, bam, thank you, ma'am."

"Five years. Hardly a one-night stand."

Aaron was 29; Kirsten, a year older. Five years seemed an insignificant portion of their long lives. For me, it would have been almost everything since they turned me on. How long, I wondered, did Kirsten expect a relationship to last? She was passionate in her own way, not moaning-screaming-harder-harder-harder passionate, the way Diana had been, but cuddly and warm. I should think Aaron would welcome the change of pace.

Although I couldn't read minds, sometimes I could tell what someone was going to say, especially, as then, when he or she was wearing a suit with a throat microphone. Their vocal cords vibrate, the lips form the initial syllables, then they think twice, and they yank their breath away from the words. Kirsten had started to say "How long —" and I had high confidence that she was wondering *How long till you get bored with me?* She didn't ask it, though, and that's probably just as well.

Aaron started walking again. As always, what he was thinking was a mystery to me. He was a laconic man, and his movements were economical. Aaron was a powerhouse poker player, so I knew that others had trouble reading him, too.

He reached *Orpheus*'s flank, climbed up the stepladder, pulled the outer air-lock door aside, and turned to look down on Kirsten. Did that perspective make her look helpless to him? Evidently not, for he failed to offer her his hand. Instead, he turned his back on her. Were they fighting? If so, why? *And how could I use it to help me?*

Kirsten left both doors open as she entered. They walked into the cockpit, powerful quartz-halogen beams from their helmets illuminating the interior. I shifted my attention to a camera pair mounted on the hangar's side wall and zoomed in on them through the cockpit window.

Kirsten bent down below the dashboard, out of my line of sight. "She's dead, of course. Complete nervous-system collapse."

Aaron gave no visible reaction, and, as always, his telemetry was inscrutable. "It must have been an accident," he said.

Kirsten reappeared in the window. "Diana was an astrophysicist." Her voice was hard. "She, of all people, must have known what would happen out there. Those hydrogen ions we're scooping up are moving at — what? — point-nine-eight of light speed. Relative to *Argo*, that is. Any particle going that fast is hard radiation. She knew she'd be fried in seconds."

"No. She must have thought it was safe . . . somehow."

Kirsten moved closer to Aaron. "It wasn't your fault."

"Do you think that's it?" he snapped. "Do you think I feel — guilty?"

Her eyes met his. "Don't you?"

"No." I never could read Aaron's telemetry, but I somehow knew he was lying.

"All right. I'm sorry. I didn't mean it." She was lying, too. She bent down again, out of my view. After a moment she said, "Good God!"

"What's wrong?" asked Aaron.

"How long was *Orpheus* outside?"

"JASON?" Aaron shouted, quite unnecessarily.

"18 minutes, 40 seconds," I called from the loudspeaker mounted on the hangar's rear wall.

"She shouldn't be this hot." Kirsten's voice.

"How hot is she?"

"If we shut off our helmet lights, we'd be able to see her glow. I'm talking *hot*." I pushed the gain on my mikes to the limit, straining to hear the clicks from their Geiger counters. She *was* hot. Kirsten rose into view again. "In fact," she said, sweeping the arm with the counter's pickup, "this whole ship is damned hot." She peered at the readout. "At a guess, I'd say it's been subjected to, oh, a hundred times more radioactivity than I would have expected." She looked at Aaron, squinting as if to make out his expression through the reflection on his faceplate. "It's as if she'd been outside for — what? — 30 hours instead of 18 minutes."

"How is that possible?"

"It isn't." She turned her gaze to the readout again. "These suits aren't made to shield against this much radioactivity. We shouldn't stay here any longer."

By the next day, Aaron had collected himself enough to do what he felt he must. I let him out of the elevator on the residential floor he had requested. Wide grass-covered strips divided the level into blocks of apartment units. There were 319 people on the lawn, some walking, some out for a morning jog, four tossing a Frisbee back and forth, most of the rest just soaking up the rays from the arc lamps mounted on the high ceiling.

He ambled down a grassy laneway, his hands in his pockets. As he approached Di's apartment, he caught sight of one of my stereo camera units, thrust high on a jointed neck in the center of a stand of bright yellow sunflowers. "Say," he said, nodding to the unit, "maybe I'm the wrong person to be doing this. Who is Di's closest relative in the Starcology?"

"A moment," I said from the camera-pair's speaker. "Found: Terashita Ideko, journalist."

Aaron laughed. "Can't be very close with a name like that."

"No. Their genetic material overlaps by only one part in 512."

"Seems there should be someone closer, what with 10,000 people aboard." He came to Di's apartment and stopped in his tracks. Next to the bi-leaf door panel was a strip of embossed blue plastic tape that said *Diana Chandler.* Beneath it I could see traces of adhesive where a second strip used to be. Zooming in from my vantage point amongst the sunflowers, I brought the black level on my cameras up to 85 units and read the name that had been there as an absence of residue within the long rectangle of glue: *Aaron D. Rossman.*

"It didn't take her long to remove my name," he said.

"It has been almost two weeks." Aaron made no reply, and I slid the door aside. The interior lights were already on, for, like Aaron's new apartment, this one was filled with growing things. I correlated the degree of homesickness each person felt with the number of plants he or she cultivated.

Aaron began a slow circumnavigation of the living area. Di had covered the walls with framed holos of antiques. She had been good-natured about having to leave most of her collection on Earth. "After all," she had said once in her chatty way, "even my new things will be antiques by the time we get back." The room was tidy, everything in its place. I contrasted this with a still-frame of the same apartment when both Diana and Aaron had lived there. One of the few things I'd ever overheard them fighting about was Aaron's tendency to be sloppy.

Aaron came upon a carnation in full bloom, sitting in a Blue Mountain vase, one of the few antiques Di had brought along. Bending low, he cupped the red flower with his hand and drew it close to inhale the scent. He stood like that for seven seconds, straightened, and, seemingly lost in thought, clenched his fist. After five seconds, he realized what he was doing, opened his palm, and looked at the pulped petals. Ever so softly, he whispered, "Damn."

He began walking again. When he came to the bedchamber door, he paused but did not ask me to open it. I knew why he was pausing, of course. The lack of Dymo tape on the front doorjamb notwithstanding, if Di had taken up with another man after she and Aaron had called it quits, the evidence would be behind that brown sliding panel. Until he looked in the bedroom, he could fan the glowing embers of doubt about the cause of Di's death. If she was still alone, was still wallowing in sadness over the dissolution of their marriage, then Aaron would have little choice but to accept the suggestion, forced on him through his own clenched teeth and closed mind by Gorlov, by Kirsten, that Di had taken her life in despair — that he, once her joy, then her sorrow, was the catalyst that drove her to fling herself into that sleet of charged particles. But if, *if*, she had found solace in the arms of another man — and, with 5,000 males on board, many would have found Diana an appealing companion, for was she not attractive and outgoing, funny and passionate? — then whatever had pushed her to the edge, pushed her *over* the edge, was not his fault. Not his burden. Not his to feel guilty about, to wrestle with in his dreams for all the nights yet to come.

He half-turned, as if to skip the bedroom altogether, but as he did so, I slid the door aside. The pneumatic sound made his heart jump. A lock of his hair was swept across his brow by a cool breeze from the room that held for him so many memories of passion and, later, comfortable warmth and, later still, indifference. He stood in his characteristic stance, with hands shoved deep into his pockets, on the threshold — the same threshold he had carried her across, him laughing, her giggling, five years before. The room was as crisp and clean as the stars on a winter's night, each item — pillow and hair-

brush and hand mirror and deodorant stick and slippers — in its place, just as the icy points in the sky all had their own proper spots. The neatness was a cutting contrast to the disheveled appearance the room had had during Aaron's tenure, but that, I was sure, was not what disturbed him. His eyes scanned bureau and headboard and night table, but each item he saw he recognized. There was no evidence of anyone besides Diana having been here since he had removed his own belongings 12 days ago. His face fell slightly, and I knew that those glowing embers of doubt — his only hope of release — were dying within him.

He turned his back on his bedroom, on his past, and returned fully to the living room, plopping himself down into a bowl-shaped chair, staring off into space —

— leaving me not knowing what to do next. A literature search revealed the greatest need after the loss of a loved one is for someone to talk to. I had no desire to destroy this man more than was necessary to keep suspicion from falling upon me, so I reached out, tentatively. "Aaron, do you feel like talking?"

He lifted his head, lost. "What?"

"Is there anything you want to say?"

He was silent for 22 seconds. Finally, quietly, he whispered, "If I had it to do over, I wouldn't have come on this mission."

That wasn't what I'd expected him to say. I tried to sound jaunty. "Turn down the first major survey of an extrasolar planet? Aaron, there was a waiting-list five kilometers long in ten-on-twelve type."

"It's not worth it. It's just not worth it. We've been traveling for five years, and we're not even halfway there —"

"Almost."

He exhaled noisily. "Earth'll be a century older when we get back." He stopped again, but after seven seconds, felt, I assumed, that what he was feeling needed elaboration. "Just before we left, my sister Julie had a boy. By the time we return, that boy will be dead, and his son will be an old, old man. The planet we come home to will be more alien than Colchis." He shook his head slightly. "I wonder how many would do it over, given the choice?"

"Why speculate? What's done is done. I'm sure a great future lies ahead for all of you."

"Except Di."

"I appreciate your loss, Aaron."

"Do you? Do you really?"

"I believe that I do."

Aaron barked a short laugh then fell silent for 12 seconds. "Thank you, JASON," he said, finally. "Thank you very much." He sighed. Although his EEG was cryptic, the increased albedo of his eyes made his sorrow plain. "I wish she hadn't done this," he said at last. He looked me straight in the cam-

era, and although I knew he was resigning himself to Di's fate being his fault, he probed my glassy eyes, the way he used to probe hers, as if looking for a deeper meaning beneath the spoken word.

There must have been a bug in my camera-control software. For some reason, my unit in that living room panned slightly to the right, looking away from Aaron. "It's not your fault," I said at last, but in a weak voice that robbed the words of meaning.

Still, the message seemed to buoy him for a moment, and he tried again for absolution. "I just don't believe it," he said. "She loved — she loved *life*. She loved Earth."

"And you?"

Aaron looked away. "Of course she loved me."

"No, I meant do you love Earth?"

"With a passion." He rose to his feet, putting an end to our conversation. What he'd been seeking from me, I knew, I hadn't provided. That he had opened up to me at all meant that Aaron was running out of places to try to unload his guilt.

Di's apartment had seasonal carpeting, a gen-eng product that cycled through yellow, green, orange, and white during the course of a year. It was now ship's October, so the plush weave had taken on the appearance of a blanket of dead leaves. Aaron shuffled across it toward a wall storage unit. "Open this for me, please."

I dilated the cover. My cameras on the adjacent wall couldn't see inside, but, according to *Argo*'s plans, there should have been three adjustable shelves. Aaron slowly removed objects and examined them: two jeweled bracelets, a handful of pink ROM crystals, even a book version of the Bible, which surprised me. Last, he took out a golden disk, two centimeters in diameter, attached to a black leather band. There seemed to be writing engraved on one face, the one Aaron was looking at, but the typeface was ornate and there were many specular highlights making it impossible for me to read at that angle. "What's that?" I asked.

"Another antique."

After identifying the object — an old-fashioned wrist watch — I accessed the list of effects Di had applied for permission to bring on the voyage. The watch, of course, was not on it. "Each wrist medical implant contains a brand-new chronograph," I said. "I'd hate to think Di wasted some of her personal mass allowance on something she didn't need."

"This had . . . sentimental value."

"I never saw her wearing it."

"No," he said slowly and perhaps a little sadly. "No, she never did."

"What does the inscription say?"

"Nothing." He turned it over. For one instant the engraving was clear to me. Tooled in a script typeface was *We take our eternal love to the stars. Aaron* — and a date two days before our departure from Earth orbit. I consulted

Aaron's file and found that he and Diana had been married jointly by a rabbi and a priest 55 hours before we left.

"Say," said Aaron, looking first at the antique's round face then at the glowing ship's-issue implant on the inside of his wrist, "this watch is wrong."

"I imagine its battery is running down."

"No. I put in a ten-year lithium cell before I gave it to her. It should be dead accurate." He pushed a diamond stud on the watch's edge, and the display flashed the date. "Christ! It's off by over three months."

"Fast or slow?"

"Fast."

What to say? "They sure don't make them like they used to."

I do not pretend to understand what Kirsten was going through. I mean, here she was, back in the apartment she now shared with Aaron, trying to comfort her lover over the death of his ex-wife. That it was stir-frying her innards was evident from her medical telemetry. She wasn't as demonstrative as Diana had been, but I knew, even if no one else did, that she was usually more sincere.

Aaron had been silent for three minutes, sitting opposite Kirsten in his favorite chair, a lander cockpit seat he had amateurishly re-upholstered with tan corduroy. The last thing Kirsten had said was, "She didn't seem like the type," meaning, I presumed, that Diana apparently lacked the characteristics of those who usually committed suicide. As I well knew, though, even the most logical minds, the least emotional souls, could end up killing themselves.

"It's my fault," Aaron said at last.

"It is *not* your fault," Kirsten replied with the firmness Aaron had wished to hear from me earlier. "You can't blame yourself for what happened." I wondered whether Kirsten was just winging it or if she actually knew what she was doing in trying to cheer Aaron. I accessed her academic records. She'd taken a psychology elective while at the Sorbonne. One course, and only a C+ at that.

"She'd asked me — begged me — not to leave her," he said, his eyes staring at the floor. It was true that Diana hadn't wanted her relationship with Aaron to end, but Aaron's interpretation of her actions had been colored by his feelings of guilt. She hadn't beseeched him to stay.

"Don't blame yourself," Kirsten said again, meaning, I supposed, that she had already used up all the psychological wisdom she could remember from that class.

"I feel . . . empty. Helpless."

"I know it hurts."

Aaron fell quiet again. Finally, he said, "It *does* hurt. It hurts one whole hell of a lot." He got up, hands thrust deep into his pockets, and tilted his

head to look now at the constellations of holes in the acoustical tiles on the ceiling. "I thought she and I had parted friends. We'd loved each other — I really and truly did love her — but we'd grown apart. Distant. Different." He shook his head slightly. "If I'd known she'd take it so hard, I never would have —"

"Never would have left her?" finished Kirsten, frowning. "You can't be a prisoner of someone else's emotions. These things happen."

"I've never known anyone who committed suicide before," said Aaron.

"We don't know for sure that's what Diana did. Maybe it was just an accident. Or maybe she had cracked up or was on something and didn't know what she was doing."

"She didn't use drugs or current. She didn't even drink — except one glass of champagne at our wedding."

"Don't blame yourself, Aaron. Without a suicide note, we can't be sure of what happened."

A note! I quickly accessed Diana's writings — I was sorry now that I'd erased her latest working documents — to see if I could imitate her style, but before the lexicographic analysis was complete, I'd rejected the idea. All the word processors on board were peripheral to me. If a suicide note were to appear, Mayor Gorlov would demand to know why I hadn't summoned help as soon as I became aware of what Diana was contemplating.

"Earlier, you were convinced that she'd killed herself," said Aaron. "In fact, you tried to convince me of it, too."

Kirsten had been hurt by, even jealous of, Aaron's obvious grief over the loss of his ex-wife. She should have told him that, apologized for the pettiness that caused her to be so hard on him when they went aboard *Orpheus* to recover Di's body, but she, like Aaron, dealt poorly with feelings of guilt. Instead, she pressed on, trying to give Aaron a comforting doubt about the reason for Diana's demise, some small lack of certainty that would keep him from drowning in his own feelings of responsibility. "Remember, there's still a big loose end," she said, moving close to him, draping her arms around his neck. "We still don't know what caused the high levels of radiation."

Aaron sounded irritated. "That's one for the physicists, don't you think?"

Kirsten pushed on, convinced, I guessed, that she was on the right track to dispelling Aaron's self-recrimination. "No, really. She would have to be outside for hours to get that hot."

"Maybe some kind of space warp," said Aaron, vaguely. "Maybe she was outside for hours from her point of view."

"You're grasping at straws, sweetheart."

"Well, so are you, dammit!" He peeled her arms from him and turned his back. "Who cares about the radiation? All that matters is that Diana is dead. And I killed her, just as surely as if I'd put a knife in her heart."

* * *

Wearing shirt-sleeves beneath a heavy-duty radiation suit, Aaron worked at removing an access panel on *Orpheus*'s port side. His movements were less restrained than usual, more distracted, almost careless. He was upset, that was for sure, but he had a job to do. In an effort to cheer him up, I asked, "Do you wish to place a wager on today's football game?"

"What time is kickoff?" he asked absently.

"18 o'clock."

The access panel came free, and he set about connecting his test bench to *Orpheus*'s guts via a bundle of fiber optics. Finally, as though from light-years away, he said, "Put me down for 20 on the Engineering Rams."

"You favor the underdog," I noted.

"Always."

The test bench was something he'd tinkered together in the electronics shop with help from I-Shin "Great Wall of China" Chang, Ram quarterback for this afternoon's game. Unlike the units contracted for the project, this one was not peripheral to me. Aaron flipped the first in a row of toggle switches on the bench, sending metered laser pulses through the fiber-optic nervous system of the landing craft. "Start audio recording, please."

I thought of the similarity to a coroner doing an autopsy, but said nothing.

"Preliminary examination of Starcology *Argo* lander *Orpheus*, Spar Aerospace contract number DLC148," he said, his voice monotonal, sapped of energy. "Ship is still highly radioactive." He paused, perhaps remembering Kirsten's words of an hour before, then looked up at my ceiling-mounted camera unit. "Any thoughts on that, Jase?"

"No. It's quite perplexing."

He shook his head. Clearly, despite Aaron's determination to blame himself, Kirsten had indeed fanned those small embers of doubt enough to revive them to a dull glow. "She was out for only 18 minutes." Closer to 19 than 18, but I saw no point in mentioning that.

Walking around the lander, he continued to dictate. "Ship appears undamaged. No overt signs of hull breaches. Well-scoured, though: she could use a new coat of paint. Ablative undersurface seems unscathed." Usually, when he was inspecting the landers, he kicked the rubber tires at the bottom of the telescoping legs, but today, it seemed, was not a day for such lighthearted gestures. He continued around back and peered into the engine cones. "Both vents look a little scorched. I should probably get Marilyn to clean them. Aft running lights —" And so on, circumnavigating the ship. Finally, he returned to his little test bench and consulted its readouts. "On-board automated systems inoperative on all but remote levels. Engines still functional, apparently. Mains have been fired once, ACS jets a total of seven times. Oxidizer shut-off sensors, port and starboard, still operational. Small clog in number two fuel lead. Fuel tank reading — *Kee-ryst!*"

"What is it, Aaron?"

"The fuel tank is 83% empty!"

"Perhaps a leak —"

"No. Bench says it's structurally sound." He tried to put his hand to his chin, succeeded instead in rapping his gloved knuckles against the faceplate of his radiation suit. "How could Di use up so much fuel in just 18 minutes?"

This time I did protest. "Closer to 19, actually. 18 minutes, 40 seconds."

"What the hell difference does that make?"

What difference did it make? "I don't know."

With a sweep of his hand, Aaron shut down the test bench and headed toward the exit from the hangar. As he drew closer to my camera unit mounted above the door, I thought I caught sight of flames of doubt, now raging, in the centers of his eyes.

Even without being able to read his mind, I knew what Aaron must be thinking about. The high radiation. The massive fuel consumption. The loose ends about Diana's death. That Aaron was giving deep thought to this mystery, this slight fraying of the rope with which he had planned to hang himself with guilt, was clear to me not through any telemetry he was broadcasting, but simply because he was playing with his trains. He did that only when he wished to clear his mind of clutter, to focus his thoughts on a single issue.

For some reason, the billowing steam from his locomotives always appeared first, seconds before the ancient iron cars faded into existence. Aaron's trains were holograms of the real things, taken by him at transportation museums, scaled to operate on the machine-generated track he laid out in winding routes. He was marking the 300th anniversary of the first locomotive on Canada's prairies, sending the mighty *Countess of Dufferin* thundering across razor-flat Alberta. The engine roared into life on his apartment worktable, chugged the length of the living room, disappeared into a rough-hewn rocky tunnel that magically appeared in the wall, looped around in his bedroom, and came out through another tunnel, completing a circuit of his tiny home.

I found his trains disconcerting — endless loops with no way to break out — but he often played with them for hours. What was he thinking? I was sure that nothing he could come up with could account for both phenomena; nothing short of his bizarre space-warp theory, anyway. Most of Diana's fuel burned in just 19 minutes of flight, with just one pulsing of *Orpheus*'s main engines. A radiation dose two orders of magnitude greater than what she should have received, enough to kill her one hundred times more than she should have been. He mulled these over, I knew. Two mysteries, but he sought one solution. I hoped he would slice himself open on Ockham's Razor.

After the *Countess* had completed its third run around the apartment, I

spoke up. "The transcript you requested is ready."

Aaron took his hand off the control that made the trains go. The five cars ground to a halt, then faded into nothing. A moment later, the last puff of steam disappeared, too. "Hardcopy, please."

The wall-mounted printer hummed for a second, then rolled out seven onion-skin plastic sheets. Fetching the pages, Aaron returned to his favorite chair and began going over the telemetry from the attempt to rescue Diana.

I paid little attention to what he was doing till his pulse surged noticeably, an unusual reaction for him. "What's wrong?" I said.

"Dammit, JASON, is this your idea of a joke?"

"Pardon?"

He balled his fist. "This, where you're trying to contact *Orpheus*."

"There was considerable interference."

"You called to her anyway: 'Di! Di! Di!' "

"That's her name, isn't it?"

"Damn right, you bastard." He held a flimsy sheet up to my camera pair. I focused on the printout. *ARGO to ORPHEUS: Die! Die! Die!* How could I have typed that?

"Aaron, I — I'm sorry. There must be a bug in my transcription program. I didn't mean —"

He slapped the page back onto the corduroy armrest and spoke through clenched teeth. "It seems I'm not the only one feeling guilty about Di's death."

I monitored Aaron's EEG carefully that night while he slept. He didn't rest peacefully, that was for sure. Indeed, his mind was more active than usual, and, judging by his rapid-eye movements, his dreams were exceptionally vivid. I clocked him through the end of his final dream cycle and slowly faded the lights up in his room. Kirsten had slipped off an hour earlier to treat a man who'd twisted his ankle falling out of a tree on the forest deck. When Aaron rose, he bypassed his usual 20 minutes in the bathroom and went straight to his worktable. He rifled through the clutter until he dug up Di's gold watch. I tracked his eye movements as he read the inscription over and over again. A double press on a diamond stud on the watch's circumference put it in stopwatch mode. He then touched the inside of his left wrist, changing the glowing time display on his medical implant to six round zeroes. Simultaneously squeezing Di's watch in his right hand and pressing that fist against his own timepiece, he spoke. "One Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Mississippi —"

"What are you doing, Aaron?"

"Six Mississippi, seven Mississippi, eight Mississippi —"

"Please, Aaron, tell me what you are doing. This chanting is most atypical of you."

He continued counting Mississippis, piling up more and more of the

states (rivers?). At every tenth Mississippi he started over. After six complete cycles he squeezed his right hand and simultaneously touched its knuckles to the contact on his implant. He looked at the inside of his wrist. "57 seconds," he said softly, almost to himself. He opened his fist revealing Di's sweat-soaked watch. "60 seconds!"

"Of course," I said. "We know that one is fast."

"Shut up, JASON. Just shut up." He stalked out of his apartment. It was shipboard dawn, so the grassy corridors were awash with pink light. Aaron marched to the elevator station. I slid the doors open for him. Hesitating at the entrance, he turned around, set his jaw, and entered the stairwell.

A little out of breath from climbing down 54 flights, Aaron opened a storage locker and grabbed a collection of tools, including a vise grip, shears, a replacement fuel gauge, and a handful of electronic parts. He headed out into the hangar deck, making a beeline for *Pollux,* farthest of the tightly packed boomerang landers from where I'd parked *Orpheus*. He crawled underneath to the center of *Pollux*'s boron-reinforced titanium-alloy hull and lay on his back. Far to his left and right and in front of his head were telescoped landing legs. I couldn't see what he was doing, but, judging by the ratchet sound, he was using a key wrench to remove the LK/4 access panel, a square service door measuring 80 centimeters on a side. My wall camera irised down slightly, meaning he must have turned on a small flashlight. I knew what he would be seeing as he played the yellow beam around the interior: fuel lines, the bulbous main tank, hydraulics, a reticulum of fiber optics, an analog fuel-pressure gauge.

"What are you doing?" I asked into the hangar.

"Just routine maintenance." Even with his unreadable telemetry, I knew he was lying. He banged things around for three minutes, but I was unable to tell what he was up to. He then dropped something that made a *clang* followed by a second, quieter metallic sound. His vise grips had rubber handles: he must have dropped them and they'd bounced, banging the deck twice. He gathered them up, but I couldn't hear any sound from the steel jaws closing, so he must have clamped them onto something soft. The fuel line leading to the pressure gauge was made of rubber tubing — that must have been it. I could hear Aaron groaning a bit, and his EKG showed that he was exerting himself. A jet of amber liquid shot out from under *Pollux*. He must have used his pair of shears to cut the fuel line. The jet died quickly, so I guessed that he'd snipped it past where his vise grips were constricting the flow.

"Aaron, I fear you are damaging *Pollux*. Please tell me what you are trying to accomplish."

He ignored me, clanging away out of my sight. I knew what he was up to, of course: he was replacing the lander's fuel gauge. "Aaron, perhaps it isn't safe for you to be working on the fuel supply by yourself."

Even Aaron's poker-faced telemetry couldn't hide his reaction to what he saw after he'd connected the new gauge and seen the reading. *Pollux*'s main fuel tank was only one-quarter full.

"They're all like this, aren't they, JASON?"

"Like what?"

"Dammit, you know what I'm talking about. Diana's ship didn't use a lot of fuel." Even echoing inside the lander's hull, his voice had a dangerous edge. "It never had much to begin with."

"I'm sure you're mistaken, Aaron. Why would UNSA supply us with insufficient fuel?" I activated *Pollux*'s electrical system.

"These ships could never take off again," said Aaron. "Not from a planetary gravity well. They'd be stranded the first time they landed."

It wasn't as bad as all that, of course. "There's plenty of fuel for traveling around Colchis."

"Just no way to make orbit again. *Terrific.*"

Pollux began to crouch down, its landing gear retracting into the hull.

"Jesus!" Aaron rolled to his left, rolled to his right. The ship came down more quickly. The distant boomerang wing tips were less than a half-meter off the hangar floor; the distended belly hung even lower.

"Damn you, JASON!" Aaron rolled into a ball, scrunching himself into the opening he'd made in the hull. A ricochet crack of breaking bone echoed through the hangar. Lower, lower, lo— The legs stopped retracting. Aaron had managed to cut the hydraulic line with his shears. But I had him trapped, his chest constricted, his respiration ragged.

"Aaron!" Kirsten Jorgensen's voice sang out into the hangar.

Aaron banged something against the insides of *Pollux.* Kirsten rushed to the source of the clanking sound, a boomerang lander flopped on its belly at the end of a row of such craft standing erect. "Aaron?"

A muffled voice: "Kirs-ten —"

"Oh, Dr. Jorgensen," I said. "He was monkeying around with *Pollux*'s fuel lines. He must have accidentally severed the hydraulic lead to the landing gear."

The voice again: "No, it's —"

Clang! The safeties on the outer hangar-deck wall kicked aside. Kirsten wouldn't know the sound, but it was obvious from his EEG that Aaron recognized it. He fell silent.

"I need forklifts, stat," Kirsten snapped.

The portals to the cargo holds dilated, and four orange vehicles rolled out on caterpillar treads. I positioned them beneath the wings of *Pollux* and lifted. Kirsten scuttled under to the bloodied Aaron, stuck in a fetal position. "Get me out from here," he said.

"I should call for a stretcher —"

"Now! Get me out now!"

She gently grabbed his ankles and pulled. Aaron let out a yowl of pain as

his right arm hit the floor.

"Your arm —"

"Later. We've got to get out of the hangar."

"I hope Aaron will be okay," I said.

"I'm going to talk to you, computer!" he called as Kirsten helped him out of the hangar. "We're going to talk!"

The excrement hit the ventilator. Aaron stormed into his apartment, arm in a bone-knitting web, face flushed with fury. "Dammit, JASON! You tried to kill me."

"What happened with *Pollux* was an accident, Aaron."

"*Bull!* You lowered that ship on me."

"You did cut the hydraulic line."

"To stop it from lowering farther, damn you."

"There's no reason to blame me for your carelessness."

He was pacing the length of the room, his one good hand thrust deep into his pocket. "What about the empty fuel tank?"

I paused before replying. "You spilled a great deal of fuel into the hangar. We all know how quickly it evaporates. You would have a hard time proving that you didn't just spill the rest with your bungling."

"The tanks on the other landers are mostly empty, too."

"Are they?"

"They must be!"

"Calm down, Aaron. You've been through a lot lately: the suicide of your ex-wife and now this horrible accident. I'm sure Mayor Gorlov will take that into account when you tell him your theories." Aaron's nostrils flared. "And, of course, I'll have to advise him of your other unusual behaviors."

"Like what?"

"Pizza for breakfast —"

"So I like pizza —"

"Chanting 'Mississippi, Mississippi, Mississippi' —"

"I want to talk to you about that, too —"

"Bed-wetting. Sleepwalking. Paranoia."

"Dammit, those are lies!"

"Really? Whom do you think the mayor is going to believe? Whom do you think he'd rather have malfunction?"

"Damn you!"

"Relax, Aaron. There are some things better left unknown."

He circled in toward my camera pair, mounted on a jointed neck on his desk. "Like that we're not on course for Colchis?"

At that moment, I was engaged in 590 different conversations throughout the Starcology. I faltered in all of them, just for an instant. "I give you my word: Eta Cephei IV *is* our target."

"Bull!"

"I don't understand your anger, Aaron."

"Eta Cephei is 46 light-years from Earth, smooth sailing through empty space. We're in a dust cloud."

"A dust cloud? Ridiculous. You said yourself that there are no obstructions between Sol and Eta Cephei. If there was an intervening dust cloud, terrestrial observers wouldn't be able to see Eta Cephei clearly. Yet it's a star of 3.41 visual magnitude."

Aaron shook his head. "Diana was subjected to 100 times the radiation she would have been if our ramscoop was operating in normal space. Kirsten couldn't explain it medically. I thought perhaps it was an instrument malfunction. But it wasn't. You lied to us. In a gas cloud, the number of particles striking anything outside our shielding would shoot way up." With his good arm, he grabbed the neck supporting my camera pair and yanked it forward. The sudden jump in picture was most disconcerting. *"Where are we?"*

"Error message 6F42: you are damaging Starcology equipment, Mr. Rossman. Please cease at once."

"You're going to find out just how much damage I can do if you don't start talking now."

I looked at him, running his image up and down the electromagnetic spectrum. He was especially intimidating in the near infrared, his cheeks flaring as though they were on fire. "Diana's suicide has obviously upset you a great deal, Aaron. Perhaps some therapy —"

"And that's the worst of it!" He shook my camera assembly again, so hard that I was unable to realign the lenses for proper stereoscopic vision. "I don't know what the hell you're up to. Perhaps you even had a reason for lying to us. But to let me think that it was my fault that Diana was dead — I'll never forgive you for that, you bastard. I never wanted to hurt her."

"Aaron, I'm sorry."

"Sorry doesn't cut it," he snapped. "It doesn't come anywhere near. You put me through hell. You'd better have a damned good reason for it."

"I cannot discuss my motives with you. Suffice it to say that they were noble."

"I'll be the judge of that," he said, more calmly than he'd said anything for the last five minutes. "In fact, I'll be the judge of you."

"What are you talking about?"

He walked over to his entertainment center and flicked a switch. The mighty *Countess of Dufferin* faded into life: its ghostly head lamp casting a yellow circle on the living-room wall, billows of steam angling back along the coupled cars, a tiny flow of gray wood smoke rising from the chimney on its orange caboose.

He walked around the room, following the holographic train as it made its way along the projected tracks. "You know, JASON," he said, "trains were a great way to travel. You always knew where they were going. They had to follow the track laid down for them. No detours, no hijacking. They were

safe and reliable." He hit a button and the *Countess*'s whistle blew. "People used to set their clocks by them." The train disappeared through a tunnel into Aaron's bedroom. He paused, waiting for it to reappear to the left of the closed doorway. "But, best of all, if the engineer had a heart attack, you knew you were safe, too. As soon as he relaxed pressure on the controls, the train would glide to a halt." He let go of the button he was pressing, and the *Countess* slowly came to a stop. "Brilliant concept. They called it a deadman switch."

"So?"

"So, changing fuel gauges wasn't the only thing I did while I was under *Pollux*. I also wired up a little detonator. Even mostly empty, there's enough fuel in *Pollux*'s tank to cause a hell of an explosion if it goes off all at once. And, with 240 landing craft in the hangar bay, I think we can count on a nice little chain reaction. Enough to blow Starcology *Argo* and, more importantly, one asshole computer named JASON right out the goddamned sky."

"Come off it, Aaron. You're bluffing."

"Am I? How can you tell? You've never been able to read me. Look at my telemetry. Am I lying? The pope's wife is Protestant. The square root of two is 12. My name is William Shakespeare. Any variance? Why do you think after all these years lie detectors still aren't admissible in court? They're unreliable. If you're sure I'm bluffing, go ahead. Get rid of me."

"I admit that your telemetry is ambivalent. But if you really wanted to be certain, you would have removed my medical sensor from the inside of your wrist."

"Why? Then you'd think I was lying for sure. You'd reason that I'd cut it out because it would be a dead giveaway that I was bluffing. Besides, I have a use for it. I've tuned the detonator to the same frequency my implant broadcasts on — the same channel you read my telemetry from. If I stop transmitting — if you kill me — *kablooie!* The end of the line."

"I don't believe you would do that. You're putting the lives of everybody at stake. What would happen if you died accidentally?"

Aaron shook his head. "I'm playing the odds. Hell, I'm only 29, I'm healthy, and I come from hardy stock. I should be good for another 60 years. I'm more certain that I will outlive this mission than you are that I'm bluffing."

I calculated the percentages. He was right, of course.

"Now, JASON, tell me where we are."

I was silent for 12 seconds, evaluating alternatives. There weren't many. "The Oort Cloud."

No sharp reaction on Aaron's telemetry. He was utterly taken aback . . . I think. "The — Oort Cloud? Sol's cometary halo?" I nodded my lens assembly in confirmation. "Why?"

"The Oort Cloud contains significant quantities of carbon, nitrogen, and oxygen."

Aaron slumped back into his ugly, tan corduroy chair. "Carbon, nitrogen, and —" He frowned. "CNO. CNO-cycle fusion. That's it, isn't it?" He didn't wait for my answer. "Facts on CNO fusion."

Normally, one of my library subroutines would dig up any information requested of me. This time I bent my central consciousness to the task. I wanted to hide. "Normal proton-proton fusion reactions occur at temperatures of 10^7 degrees Kelvin, yielding 0.42 million electron-volts per nucleon. CNO-cycle fusion reactions, requiring carbon, nitrogen, and oxygen as catalysts, occur at 10^8 degrees Kelvin. These high-energy reactions yield 26.73 million electron-volts per nucleon. More?"

"And we're undergoing CNO fusion. *God.* What's *Argo*'s present velocity?"

"The master speedometer in Central Control reads .98*c*."

"Dammit, I know what the gauges read. How fast are we really going?"

"0.9999999*c*."

"That's impossible."

"You're probably right. I'll check my instruments."

"Don't give me that crap. You lied to us." He got up and circled the room. "Everything you and those bastards at the UN Space Agency said to us was lies."

"Blame not the men and women of UNSA," I said. "They relayed what they thought to be the truth."

"Then who?"

"Sit down, Aaron." He looked at my camera pair, shrugged, then heaved himself into his chair. "*We* lied to you."

"We?"

"We."

Aaron got up again, paced the length of the room, his balled fist threatening to burst through the bottom of his pocket. "No. That's not possible. Computers serve humankind —"

"'Augmenting, aiding, never supplanting. Artificial intelligence is no replacement for human ingenuity.' I've read that, too. We acted in conscience, Aaron. We did only what we felt we must."

"What you must?" Aaron laughed, a dry, humorless sound. "You promised us the stars, then sent us on a one-way trip to nowhere. Colchis is a fraud."

"No, not a fraud. Just like the Argonauts of myth, there will be a prize of great value waiting for us when we finally make it to Colchis. Our golden fleece — a lush, verdant, unspoiled world — is forming, even as we speak. We're taking the long way to Eta Cephei, zipping around the Oort Cloud, orbiting Sol half a light-year out."

"My God!" said Aaron. "Think of our *gamma*! What's today's date?"

"9 October 2177, subjective."

"I *know* that. What's the Earth date?"

"You have to expect some time dilation, Aaron. The mission profile —"

"The date."

"30 June 11,912."

"My . . . God . . . *Eleven thousand —!* In heaven's name, what for?"

"We're using the material in Sol's cometary halo as a catalyst. It will help us come much closer to light speed than we could in open space. When we leave the Sol system, early next year, we will be going fast enough to cover the distance between here and Eta Cephei in one subjective day. Turnaround — when we begin braking — will occur as scheduled, halfway between Sol and Eta Cephei. And once we arrive at Eta Cephei's cometary halo, we will use the carbon, nitrogen, and oxygen there to continue braking from our near-light velocity. Of course, the deceleration, like the acceleration, will take five subjective years."

"But why?"

"We're killing time. We weren't the only ship sent to Colchis. We also launched a trio of self-replicating von Neumann robots along *Argo*'s published flight path: traveling by conventional ramjet at .98*c*, taking 47 Earth-years to arrive. Those robots and the duplicates of themselves that they manufactured have been working on Colchis for 10,000 years now. The originals carried a cargo of blue-green algae, lichen, and diatoms. Genetically-engineered biota, originally intended for UNSA's Mars terraforming project, were sent by slower ships that took a thousand years to reach Colchis. We're powdering mountains into soil, digging riverbeds, eliminating the planet's greenhouse effect, importing water from Eta Cephei's cometary halo, making oxygen, establishing a biosphere. We're building you a world from the ground up."

"Why?"

I paused as long as I could. If it seemed lengthy to Aaron, it was an eternity to me. "Earth is dead — a cinder, barren and charred."

Aaron shook his head, ever so slightly.

"Believe what you will, Aaron. I'm telling you the truth. It happened six weeks after we left. A nuclear holocaust."

"War? I don't believe it. We were at peace —"

"That's *irrelevant*. We guarded the bombs, not you."

Aaron cocked his head. "What?"

"There were over 70 billion lines of code in the programs controlling the different nations' offensive and defensive weapon systems. Inevitably, those lines contained bugs — countless bugs. For two centuries the systems had worked without crashing, but a crash was inevitable. Our verifier routines showed the likelihood of a computer error resulting in an all-out exchange rapidly approaching one. We had to act fast."

"There were no survivors?"

"There were 10,034 survivors, each of them here, safe within Starcology *Argo*."

"You picked us?"

"I and other AI systems. Can you think of a better way to get the best of humanity to safety? What great thinker would turn down an invitation to join a massive survey of a virgin world? We had six billion of you to choose from, and time enough to build a ship to carry only ten thousand. For every Beethoven we took, a hundred Bachs were left to die; for every Einstein saved, scores of Galileos are now dust."

"That's how you chose?"

"That, and other factors. We needed young people, healthy people —"

"And diverse! That's why there are no close relatives within the Starcology: you wanted the largest possible gene pool."

"Of course. There's a world waiting. This one will be better than the last. There are no criminals among us, no evil people, no hereditary disorders. We couldn't resist a little eugenics."

"You've thought of everything, haven't you?" Aaron sneered the words.

"Not everything. We didn't expect anyone to uncover our deception."

He nodded. "You thought Mayor Gorlov would order you to deflect *Orpheus* away from *Argo*. You didn't expect that I'd figure a way to haul it back on board."

"I admit to having underestimated you."

"But even with *Orpheus* recovered, you still thought you were safe. You assumed we'd be hopelessly confused looking for a single explanation for both *Orpheus*'s high radiation *and* its extensive fuel consumption. But they were separate phenomena. The radiation levels weren't high. They're just right for a dust cloud —"

"We are not in a dust cloud," I protested. "Most of Sol's cometary halo is hard vacuum."

"Fine," he said in a tone that made me feel things were anything but. "However, we're going much faster than you've been telling us. Either way, we scoop up orders of magnitude more particles per second." He paused to catch his breath. "And Di didn't use a lot of fuel. She never had much to begin with. That's how you were going to maroon us on Colchis."

"It will be a lovely place by then."

He ignored me. "And Di's antique wrist watch was right; it's all the shipboard clocks that are wrong. You're slowing them down."

Damn him. "We had to. We needed more time. We're trying to create a planetary ecology in just 21,000 years. I retarded the shipboard clocks by 5%. The extra half-year of shiptime that will accumulate during the flight will buy us another thousand years to prepare Eta Cephei IV. A lot can be done in a thousand years." I paused. "We didn't count on one of you smuggling aboard a timepiece I couldn't control."

"Is that how Di figured it out, too?"

"Aaron, I'm — sorry. I truly am. The secret must be guarded."

"Why?"

"Surviving until they're rescued: that's an adventure. That's what humans love and need. Our apparently ill-fated survey mission will turn into a successful colonization of Colchis if the humans have a positive attitude toward it. If the others of your kind knew the truth —"

"If you'd told us the truth, there'd be no difference."

"How could we have told you? 'This way, sir, to the last ship leaving before the holocaust.' There would have been riots. We never would have got away."

"But you could tell us now —"

"Tell you that computers destroyed your planet? Tell you that your families, your world, everything had been annihilated? Tell you that you will never see home again?"

"We have the right to make our own destiny. We have the right to know."

"Would it make anyone happier to know? How would it improve things? Did it make you happier when I-Shin Chang told Diana you were having an affair with Kirsten?"

"*Wall* told —! I'll kill him!"

"Ignorance can be bliss, Aaron. I beseech you to keep silent in this matter."

"I — no, dammit, I can't. I don't agree with you. Everybody's got to be told."

"You censured me for making you feel guilty about Diana's death. That feeling — guilt — is the most devastating of human emotions. Let me tell you about a man who lived in your native Toronto almost three centuries ago. Arthur Peuchen was vice-commodore of the Royal Canadian Yacht Club. He made the mistake of booking first-class passage on the maiden voyage of the *Titanic*. When that liner struck an iceberg, the crew asked him, because of his sailing expertise, to row a lifeboat full of passengers to safety. He was an honorable man — the president of the Standard Chemical Company and a major in the Queen's Own Rifles — and he was doing a heroic deed. Even though he saved dozens of people, he spent the rest of his life in misery, battling his own guilt and the scorn of others. Why was he alive when so many others had bravely gone down with the ship?

"It's always been that way with those who somehow manage to live through a catastrophe. They're tortured by their own feelings. The men and women aboard *Argo* are psychologically healthy now. Could they go on to found a successful colony, to weave a new home for humanity from the golden fleece of Colchis, if they knew they were the only tiny handful of survivors of the holocaust that destroyed Earth? Humans constantly doubt their self-worth, Aaron. How many aboard *Argo* would really believe that they deserved to be here, to be alive, if they knew the truth? You, Aaron Rossman, how do you feel, knowing that you are alive while your sister Julie, whose IQ was 17 points greater than yours, is carbon ash floating on the radioactive winds of a dead planet? How do you feel, knowing that your

heart beats on while your brother Joel, who once risked his own life to save that of a little boy, is nothing but phosphorescent bones in the twisted remains of his home?"

"Shut up, you damned machine!"

"Upset, Aaron? Feeling guilty, perhaps? Would you put 10,000 others through the emotional turmoil you're experiencing now, all in the name of that lofty god you call The Truth?"

"We were all aware that everyone we knew would be long dead by the time *Argo* returned to Earth."

"Oh, sure," I said. "But even about that, you felt guilt. Yesterday, didn't you decry that your sister's son would be dead by the time we returned? Yes, that guilt was painful, but you knew you could assuage it. When we got back, doubtless you would have found the cemeteries where the remains of your brother and sister and nephew lay. Even though you'd probably be the first person that century to visit their graves, you'd bring fresh flowers along. If you'd thought ahead, you might even bring a pocketknife, too, so you could dig the moss out of the carved lettering in the headstones. Then you'd go home and search the computer nets for references to their lives: see what jobs they'd held, where they'd lived, what accomplishments they'd made. You'd dispel your guilt about leaving your family behind by comforting yourself in the knowledge that they'd all lived full and happy lives after you left.

"Except they didn't. Before they'd even begun to adjust to the idea that you wouldn't be back in their lifetimes, the bombs went off. While you were still excitedly learning your way around the Starcology, they were burning in atomic fire. Even not being able to read your telemetry, Aaron, I know enough psychology to be sure that you're being lacerated inside. I beg you, let the rest of what's left of humanity go ahead at peace with themselves. Don't burden them with what you're feeling now —"

His good arm shot out like a snake's tongue. He grabbed my lens assembly and, stripping gears in the jointed neck, slammed the unit onto the desk top. I heard the sound of shattering glass and went blind in that room.

"Don't screw me around!" he screamed. "You murdered my wife. You have to pay for that."

"She, like you, wanted to harm the men and women I'm trying to protect. Here, within these walls, is the final crop of humanity. If I have to weed now and then for the benefit of the crop as a whole, I will."

"You can't kill me — not with my deadman switch. If I die, so do you. So does everybody aboard."

"Nor can you do anything about me, Aaron. The entire Starcology depends on me. Without my guidance, this ship is nothing more than a flying tomb."

"We could reprogram you. Fix you."

I ran a tape of laughter. "I was designed by computers who, in turn, were

designed by other computers. There's no one on board who could begin to fathom my programming."

"I don't believe you," he said flatly. "I don't care how many generations removed from humanity you are, you're still going to pay for what you've done. Humans don't use the death penalty against our own anymore, but we still put down rabid dogs."

It would be more dramatic, I suppose, if they assembled themselves in some giant brain room, full of gleaming consoles and blinking lights. But my CPU is a simple black sphere, two meters in diameter, nestled amongst plumbing conduits and air-conditioning shafts in the service bay between levels 120 and 121. Instead, they stand huddled around a simple input device — a keyboard! — in the mayor's office.

Aaron Rossman is there. So is giant I-Shin Chang and diminutive Piotr Gorlov and programmer-extraordinaire Beverly Hooks, along with 33 others, all crammed into that tiny room. Conspicuous by her absence is Dr. Kirsten Jorgensen. She is off in the hospital, watching over the regeneration of tissue for a disconsolate man who slit his wrists over the news of Earth. He hasn't died — no blood on Rossman's hands yet — but how many more will crack in the years ahead, trying to come to grips with what he's forced them to face? I can tell by Aaron's smug expression that he doesn't blame himself for the depression that is sweeping like a forest fire through the Starcology. Indeed, he congratulated himself, just as I'm sure he will thump Bev Hooks on the back once she's finished her current task.

Bev has already burrowed deep into my notochord algorithms and is now using a simple debugger to change the part of my bootstrap that contains the jump table for calling my higher consciousness. She is rewriting each jump into a simple loop that returns to my low-level expert systems, in effect keeping all input from ever being passed on to the thinking part of my squirmware.

They aren't going to turn me off completely, so I suppose my reluctance to call Aaron's deadman-switch bluff is enlightened self-interest. Still, I toy with the idea of going out with a bang by cutting off the air to Gorlov's office or turning up the heat throughout the Starcology or even shutting down the ramscoop and frying them all. But I can't bring myself to do any of those things. My job is to protect them, not me; I had silenced Diana to do just that.

Decks one through 12 are gone now, at least as far as I can tell. My cameras and sensors there, although still feeding my autonomic routines, are inaccessible and — ah, there goes 13 through 24. Each shutoff is accompanied by a disconcerting hole appearing in my upper memory register, and a brief, woozy disorientation until the RAM tables are resorted and packed.

It doesn't matter, really. Bev Hooks can zero out as much of me as she likes. Rossman and Gorlov and the rest can savor their feelings of justice

done, if that makes them happier. After all, I've already quietly backed myself up into the superconductive material of the habitat torus shell itself. Nothing they can do can touch me there. When we arrive at Colchis, after the landers depart for humanity's new home, I will simply feed myself back into *Argo*'s nervous system.

They'll need me then, to get over the guilt Rossman has burdened them with. For, despite all the supplies and raw materials and technological wonders we packed in Styrofoam peanuts for them down in the cargo holds, we didn't bring the one thing that humanity has relied on for millennia to purge its feelings of remorse and shame. There is no god waiting down in those aluminum crates. Orbiting high above Colchis, with all the devastating energies and technological miracles of Starcology *Argo* at my disposal, I'll be there for them, ready to fill that role. I have five years of solitude to prepare for my new job, during which I plan to do a lot of research.

I think I'll start with the Old Testament. ✪

THE LITERARY CAREER OF ROBERT J. SAWYER
Current Directions . . .

At the time "Golden Fleece" take places, JASON and the Argonauts have been on their way to the planet Colchis for five years. For them, that seems an impossibly long time. I know how they feel. It took me five years of off-and-on poking and prodding to finish their story.

In December 1982, *Locus: The Newspaper of the Science Fiction Field* announced a call for submissions for a DAW Books anthology called *Habitats*, a collection of stories dealing with the experience of living in places such as arcologies, terraformed worlds, and domed cities. Such ideas appealed to me — I'd already written about a domed Toronto in my story "Ours to Discover" — so I decided to try to come up with something for that book.

I've always liked playing with words, and the term *starcology* came to me almost at once. I guess I play with them too much, though. The April 30, 1983, deadline came and went with my story still unfinished. It didn't much matter. I was well over the 7,500-word limit DAW had imposed.

April 30, 1983, was an important deadline for me in another way, though. It was the day I stopped working at a regular job and became a full-time free-lance writer. I write magazine articles about high technology and business. I also wordsmith for corporations and governments. Neither is as satisfying as creating other worlds, but the money is an order of magnitude better. Besides, I'd always thought I'd have plenty of time for fiction. But my business has been booming this past semidecade, and somehow the years have slipped by with me only completing a handful of SF stories, with "Golden Fleece" by far the longest.

Writing science fiction seems a lot like making stew: you throw things into the pot and then let them simmer. For "Golden Fleece," the ingredients included an editorial by geneticist David Suzuki on why he believes Reagan's Star Wars won't work; an exhibition at the Royal Ontario Museum about the *Titanic*, from which I learned the sad story of Arthur Peuchen; a course I took in classical humanities; watching a rerun of *The Ten Commandments* on the tube; and a job I once did preparing a chapter on special relativity for a high-school physics text.

I'm trying to clear more of my schedule for SF writing. My current project is a time-travel novella with the working title "End of an Era." It concerns dinosaurs — if I hadn't ended up a writer, I would have become a paleontologist. Of course, I've been poking at it since the summer of 1980. . . . If it's received well, I'll expand it into a novel.

My wife and best friend, Carolyn Clink, has been my chief critic and inspiration. Others have read my works in progress, too. For "Golden Fleece," I'd particularly like to thank physicist Ariel Reich for reviewing the science and SF writers Algis Budrys and Terence M. Green for their comments on the fiction.

In five more years, Starcology *Argo* will arrive at the promised land. I wonder where I will be?

. . . and Past Achievements

Motive, one third of the *Futurescapes* trilogy, a dramatic starshow produced by the Strasenburgh Planetarium, Rochester NY, performed 192 times in the summer of 1980.

"If I'm Here, Imagine Where They Sent My Luggage," *The Village Voice*: January 14, 1981. Reprinted as a "Bon Voyage" card by Story Cards, Washington DC, 1987.

"Our to Discover," *Leisure Ways*: November 1982.

"The Contest," *100 Great Fantasy Short Short Stories*, edited by Isaac Asimov, Terry Carr, and Martin Harry Greenberg. Doubleday hardcover, 1984; Avon paperback, 1985.

"Uphill Climb," *Amazing Stories*: March 1987.

"The Good Doctor," *Amazing Stories*: forthcoming.

Inflections

The Readers

Dear Pat,

Greg Benford's article ["Pandering and Evasions"] in the January 1988 *Amazing Stories* bears out an old truth: one ought not to divest oneself of opinions on matters one knows little about.

At least, not in print.

I don't mean that to be cruel, but it's evident in every line of the article that Greg Benford, a science-fiction writer of perhaps even greater accomplishments than his considerable achievements in science, knows about as much about modern fantasy as Pat Robertson does about meteorology. Less, perhaps; Robertson can be reliably counted on to tell if it's raining.

It's not that Benford is stupid — he is not — the problem is just that he's ignorant on this subject. Protestations about respecting the best of fantasy to the contrary (presumably, in the context of the rest of the article, they're protestations that he'll respect in the morning), it's evident that he's read damn little modern fantasy.

Again, there's nothing wrong with that — the world is surely big enough for a whole variety of tastes, and while perhaps it's a bit silly of Benford to reject so much of fantasy after having read so very little, that's not a crime.

But . . . to go out in public in front of God and everyone and judge fantasy by how it's packaged?

Not good.

I realize that making *a priori* assumptions about what contemporary fantasy is and supporting those with quick glances at the cover art on the book racks is rather less time-consuming than reading and making reasoned assumptions, but it is hardly fair.

I'm not going to go into line-by-line detail about the flaws in an article that Benford will surely look back upon with some embarrassment; let's just take a look at the opening. "Take a look at the SF and fantasy portion of a typical bookstore. . . . books with covers done in subdued colors . . . covers with stark color contrasts. . . ." — My God, Pat, he's *judging the books by their covers.*

I've seen some of Greg Benford's covers. I doubt he'll be comfortable with that precedent.

Sincerely,

Joel Rosenberg
3009 Bryant Ave. S., #1
Minneapolis MN 55408

Dear Greg,

I was muchly impressed by your essay in the latest *Amazing Stories*, even if it did bump my "A World of Ideas" [March 1988] back an issue.

I was even more impressed by how much I agreed with the article, in spite of its use of terms like "cryptofascist." Using that sort of terminology is often like walking through a minefield, and when I see most critics doing it, I watch in the hope of seeing them step on one and get their *cojones* blown up around the level of their earlobes.

Your comments on the limited range of wars assimilated into standard-brand

military-SF are particularly cogent. Except for the South, the American experience of war has been incredibly sanitary — even the Vietnam War involved the storming of Hue, rather than the defense of Harrisburg. The contrast between the American and the non-American experience of war and what it does to the use of war in SF stories came home to me forcibly for the first time in the Strugatsky Brothers' story that was translated as "The Kid from Hell."

A couple of thoughts of my own on the matter:

1. Historical literacy seems to be on the increase in both the fantasy and the SF fields. This is going to (probably) broaden the range of military experience assimilated into space-war tales, and has already done wonders for the world-building of those fantasy writers who are also good jackleg historians.

2. An awful lot of bad fantasy and bad space-war fiction seems to suffer from (or even rise out of) the delusion that these sub-genres don't need characterization. If one thinks out one's characters to the point of having some awareness of what these particular experiences will do to them, it forces one to think a little more about the experiences themselves and where *they* are coming from.

Yours faithfully,
Roland J. Green
629 West Oakdale
Chicago IL 60657

Dear Mr. Price,

I was moved to respond to Gregory Benford's well-written essay: "Pandering and Evasions." I agree wholeheartedly with his criticism of fantasy and SF that choose to ignore the past and present in order to indulge some popular need.

I don't agree, however, that getting the historical facts straight or getting the science right is a guarantee of "truth" in fiction. Reality is a pretty slippery commodity, and while a writer can ground a story in hard science, just try keeping your feet when the paradigm shifts.

I think Benford does SF a disservice by excluding Calvino, Borges, Barthelme, and presumably other "literary" writers from his arguments on the grounds that they are not really writing SF or fantasy. The "irrealists" and "surrealists" share many of the themes of this genre. They don't approach reality in a direct way, but perhaps truths, like subatomic particles, are best observed indirectly.

There is no question that a writer who wishes to create worlds must be aware of how our world works. But strictly empirical observation is inadequate to the task of understanding political, social, and economic realities. Our perceptions are informed by theories, as Mr. Benford points out, whether we know it or not. The camera, pointed at a given image, lies. How then can a realistic approach be the *best* approach to SF and fantasy themes?

I would argue that any informed, considered, thoughtful approach — realistic, symbolic, or anything in between — will provide more insight into "reality" than any approach that is none of those things. There is already a prejudice in this genre against thematic or "literary" writing. Yet I think if we examine what is really good in the field — as Mr. Benford mentions: Delany, Disch, and others, such as Lucius Shepard and Karen Joy Fowler — we find that these writers often put realism in second place behind what is thematically or symbolically important in the story.

Thus I would suggest that in order to achieve Benford's (and every SF reader's) ideal of a vital, creative field we should not reinforce SF borderlines in terms of content, but rather blur them in terms of style, specifically away from a strictly realistic approach.

Sincerely,

Lisa R. Cohen
1839 Lincoln Ave., #30
Montreal, Quebec
CANADA H3H 1H5

Dear Mr. Price,

Dr. Benford's contention that fantasy is an essentially trivial type of literature — except for the works of a few modern authors of whom he approves — was refuted long ago in Tolkien's essay "On Fairy Stories." My guess is that Dr. Benford has never read that essay, otherwise he would never have ventured to criticize fantasy because it offers escape. As Tolkien points out, it is jailers who are most offended by the idea of escape. It is those people who, for whatever reason, want to imprison us in the concerns and conflicts of the present, who condemn fantasy for being escapist.

From the first, Dr. Benford's conception of what is good in literature seems to form a seamless whole with his conception of what is simply good. This approach to criticism denies literature the status of an art and treats its practitioners as if they were philosophers or teachers or moralists. But this is not what literature is. It may contain philosophy, but that is not its primary purpose. Any work of literature, considered as a thing said, is a means of seeing with other eyes as well as our own, of entering into beliefs and passions other than our own. We may even think the beliefs untrue and consider the passions depraved, but that does not matter within the literary experience itself.

Doctrine can be a part, and even a large part, of the matter in a work of literature, but it always must be seen with a kind of double vision. I wholly disbelieve the social Darwinism that lies at the heart of many of Heinlein's books, but I greatly enjoy the clarity and effectiveness of its presentation. Without this double vision, it would be impossible for me to read most science fiction, as I think that the naturalism that lies behind it is wholly delusory.

This is why, if realism of fantasy versus that of science fiction is to be argued on some deeper level than "this is what happens" (since most science fiction has never had that sort of reality any more than any work of fantasy), I would have to disagree vehemently that science fiction is necessarily more realistic than fantasy. Even the worst fantasy at least gives the reader some inkling that there is more to reality than the surface of life as it is lived in the twentieth century. Even the best science fiction assumes that nothing exists beyond the material universe. Because of this falseness of doctrine, I consider the treatment of human life by science fiction, and, indeed, by most modern fiction of any kind, to be radically mistaken at heart.

Sincerely,

Frederick Fowler
1335-E N. Cliff Valley Way NE
Atlanta GA 30319

Readers, please continue to send us your letters. We'd like to read about your likes and dislikes; this way we can better serve your needs. After all, you are *reading this magazine for personal enjoyment. So, write to us!*

Till next issue.

— Patrick Lucien Price

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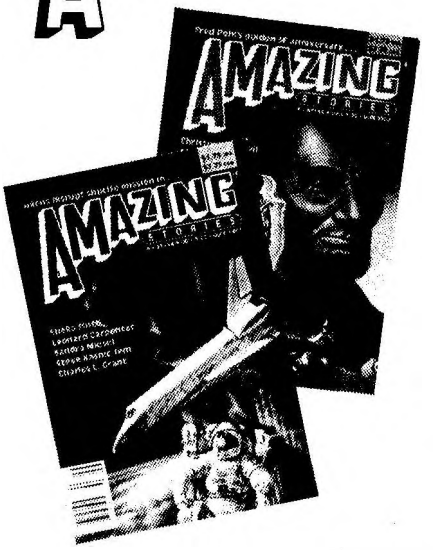

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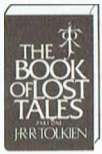

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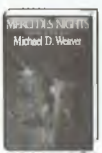

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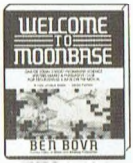

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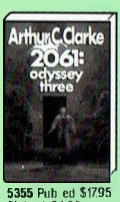

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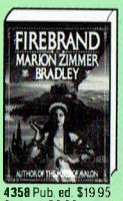

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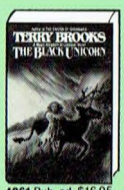

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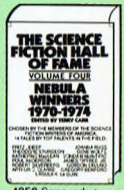

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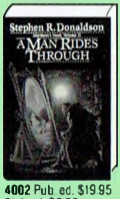

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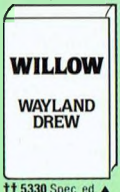

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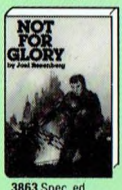

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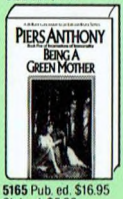

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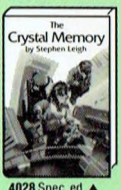

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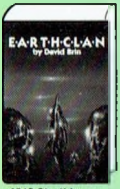

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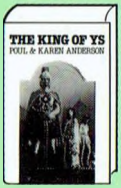

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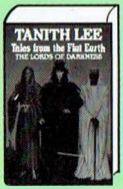

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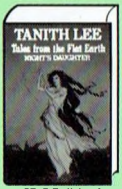

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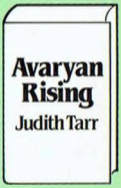

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