19TH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

APRIL 1996

Asimov's SCIENCE FICTION

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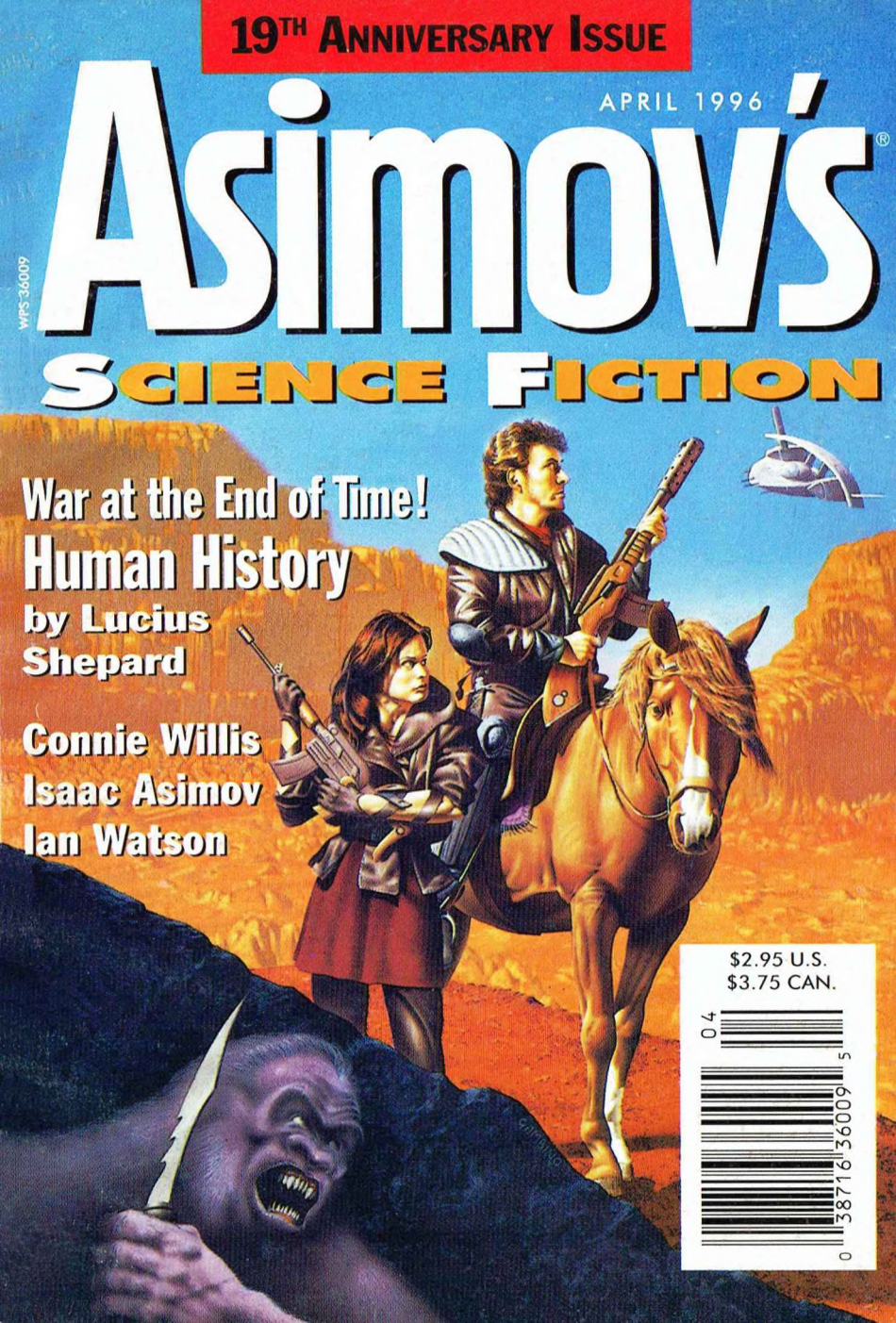

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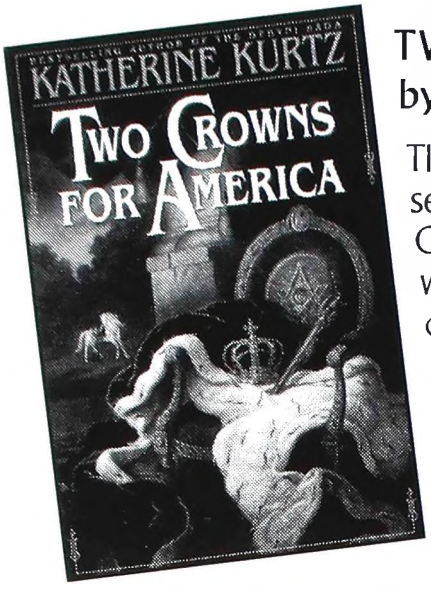

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by Katherine Kurtz

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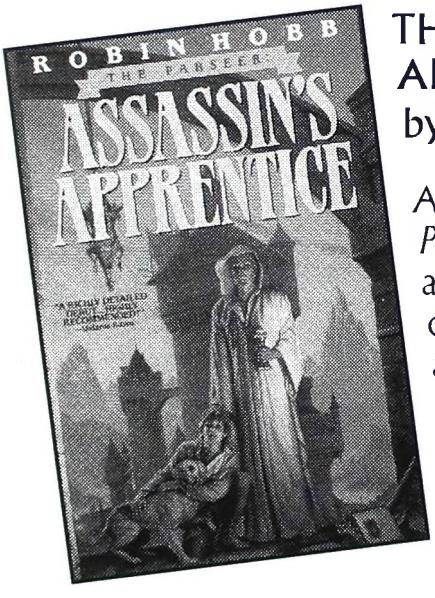

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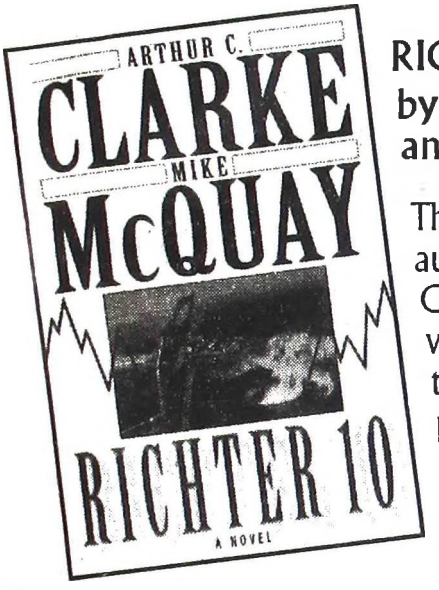

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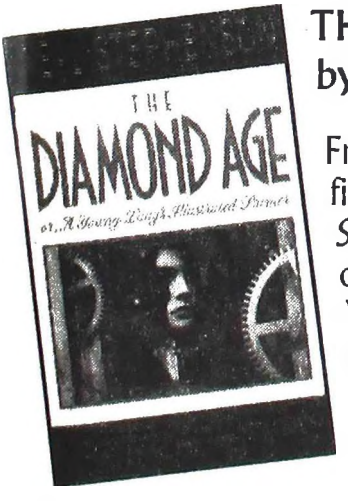

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Stories from *Asimov's* have won twenty-four Hugos and twenty-one Nebula Awards, and our editors have received ten Hugo Awards for Best Editor. *Asimov's* was also the 1994 recipient of the *Locus* Award for Best Magazine.

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EXTINCT AGAIN

Shed a tear for the ungainly old coelacanth. Very likely it's about to become extinct for the second—and, alas—final time.

The coelacanth (pronounced *SEE-la-kanth*), which is not the prettiest fish in the ocean but is surely one of the most interesting, belongs to that select group of life-forms that we call "living fossils": life-forms which for one fluky reason or another have resisted the pressures of time and evolution and have survived down through millions or even hundreds of millions of years, virtually unchanged from their primeval forms. Cockroaches, silverfish, centipedes, and horseshoe crabs all belong to this group. Their fossil histories go back to the Mesozoic, or even earlier. The large flightless birds of the Southern Hemisphere—the ostrich, the rhea, the emu, the cassowary—also qualify as survivors from a remote time. The penguin is another; so is the little kiwi of New Zealand, and the curious aquatic South American bird known as the hoatzin. The whole marsupial fauna of Australia falls into the living-fossil class—kangaroos, wallabies, koalas, bandicoots, and wombats—and so does, of course, the strangest Australian animal of all, the duck-billed platypus.

Charles Darwin was the first to propose a reason to explain the survival of these creatures across the epochs. Darwin, who coined the phrase *living fossil* when he wrote *Origin of Species,* wrote, "They have endured to the present day from having inhabited a confined area, and from having been exposed to less varied, and therefore less severe, competition."

That accounts for such animals as the marsupials, living in grand isolation in remote Australia, cut off by great expanses of ocean from the other continents and thus untroubled for millions of years by the need to compete against the later-evolving placental mammals that are so much more efficient in so many ways. Other creatures are naturally long-lived, and have many offspring, so they are difficult to wipe out. Some are so tough and durable that they can withstand almost any change in their living conditions. And some are so perfectly adapted to their niche in the biological scheme of things that there doesn't seem to be any pressing need for them to evolve any further. The cockroach is a perfect example of all these traits. The fossil record shows that its form has undergone no essential structural change over the past two or three hundred million years, and very likely it will go marching

on virtually unchanged into the unimaginable future, despite the best efforts of Johnny-come-lately species like our own to interfere with its way of life.

The coelacanth first turned up in fossil form in England in 1840. It was an odd-looking fish indeed, heavy-bodied and notably unstreamlined, with thick, fleshy fins shaped like small paddles with soft fringes at one end, set on odd stumpy stalks that must have looked almost like the beginnings of legs. Other discoveries of similar primitive-looking fossil fishes followed, in strata ranging from 60 million to 350 million years ago, and they were all grouped as *coelacanths,* meaning "hollow-spined fishes." One spectacular find was made in New Jersey when Princeton University was building a new library. The excavations revealed hundreds of 180-million-year-old coelacanth fossils packed a dozen to the square foot in the rock.

What no one expected was the discovery of a *live* coelacanth. But just such a thing made its appearance three days before Christmas, 1938, when a fishing trawler pulled into port at East London, South Africa, bearing a huge, weird-looking blue fish that had been caught in the warm waters along Africa's southeastern coast. It was four and a half feet long, weighed more than a hundred pounds, and had an enormous mouth, oversized scales, and fins set on thick meaty stalks. The captain, aware that he had pulled in something unusual, notified the East London Museum, which

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called in a local chemistry instructor, Dr. J.L.B. Smith, the leading authority on the fishes of South Africa.

By the time Dr. Smith—who was away on Christmas holiday—reached East London, the fish had died and begun to decay; the museum people were forced to discard its flesh and inner organs, but were able to mount its skin and bones. Dr. Smith's first sight of the stuffed fish, he wrote later, "hit me like a white-hot blast and made me feel shaky and queer; my body tingled. I stood as if stricken to stone. Yes, there was not the shadow of a doubt, scale by scale, bone by bone, fin by fin, it was a true coelacanth."

The discovery touched off an enormous scientific uproar. The coelacanth, so far as anyone knew, had been extinct as long as the dinosaurs—and now, suddenly, one had come forth into our own time like an ambassador from the Late Cretaceous. Were there more of them skulking in those deep African waters? Dr. Smith distributed thousands of leaflets along the coast in English, Portuguese, and French, offering cash rewards for other coelacanths.

Fourteen years passed before the next one was found, taken by a native fisherman from the Comoro Islands, which lie between Madagascar and the African mainland. The big fish had put up such a fight that the fisherman had had to hit it with a stick to kill it; then he took it to the market to sell for food, but another man recognized it as the fish for which the reward had been offered, and brought it to a local English skipper, who quickly preserved it in formaldehyde. Dr. Smith, dissecting it soon afterward, was astonished by the archaic structure of the fish's internal organs. Beyond doubt it belonged to the ancient group of fishes known as *crossopterygians,* from the Greek words for "fringe" and "fin"—the only species of crossopterygian that has survived to the present day.

September 1953 saw the discovery of a third coelacanth; three more were taken in January 1954, and another ten months later. All came from the waters around the Comoro Islands; all were dead when brought to shore. In November 1954 an eighth coelacanth was found, and this time it was captured alive; but despite all efforts to care for it, it died within a few hours.

Four decades of extensive scientific research have demonstrated the presence of an extensive colony of coelacanths, numbering many hundreds or even thousands, dwelling in a narrow zone of the Indian Ocean near the Comoros. Some 200 have been caught and brought ashore for examination; and scientists using submersible vehicles have studied and photographed living coelacanths in their own habitat. They make their homes close to shore, in submarine caves that lie about 650 feet deep, from which they emerge at night to cruise even deeper waters in search of the bottom-dwelling fish that are their prey. They are, of course, protected by law: the Federal Islamic

Republic of Comoros has made it illegal to catch them.

The problem is, though, that the coelacanths are only too catchable. Fishing is a major source of livelihood for the Comoro Islanders, and the big, bizarre-looking coelacanths readily take hooks that are meant for more ordinary fishes. The island fishermen would be happy to unhook them and toss them back, but that isn't so simple: coelacanths are powerful fighters, equipped with dagger-sharp teeth, and in order to retrieve their valuable hooks the fishermen generally have to kill them. Even those that are released alive usually die from the damage done by pressure changes during their journey up from the depths.

The ironic result is that the coelacanth, having eluded scientific discovery until our own era, may soon actually be as extinct as it once was thought to be. Studies made between 1991 and 1994 along one five-mile stretch of the coastline of the largest of the Comoro Islands show that the once extensive population of coelacanths in the caves there has fallen in just three years from an average of 20.5 fish per cave to 6.5. There may be only 200 of the primeval fish still alive in the region of the Comoros—not enough, really, to ensure the species' survival very much longer.

Nor can much be done to halt the coelacanth's plunge toward final extinction. Capturing some and putting them in aquariums to breed is apparently impossible: no captured coelacanth has ever lasted more than a few hours. Banning all fishing in the waters where they live is equally impossible: it would destroy the economy of the Comoro Islands.

So it appears that the Comoro fishermen will go on catching the occasional coelacanth, and bashing it on the head and throwing it back after retrieving their fishhooks, and one by one these last of the crossopterygians will perish. "The coelacanth," says Dr. Hans Fricke of the Max Planck Institute for Behavioural Physiology, which makes an annual census of the Comoro coelacanth population, "is something special. . . . A remarkable fish, a window into the distant past and a treasure of nature. If we let him die out it will be a tragedy." But this tragedy, like that of Oedipus Rex and most other true tragedies, appears to be unavoidable, a matter of immutable destiny. The coelacanth has had a good long run, hundreds of millions of years. But there are too many of us and too few of it, and its time is just about over. Which I regret very much. Still, the coelacanth did pretty well for itself, as the lifetime of a species goes. As Isaac Asimov might have said, we should only live so long. ●

LETTERS FROM ISAAC ASIMOV

edited by Stanley Asimov

When Isaac Asimov died in 1992, his younger brother Stanley took on the monumental task of compiling a collection of Isaac's correspondence. The job required Stanley sift through more than a hundred thousand letters. He gave this project a great deal of time and consideration. I know because I asked him to look for a letter from my father to Isaac, and mistakenly told him it had been written in 1972. I never mentioned the existence of any other correspondence.

At first, Stanley thought he'd missed it. Then to my delight, he found the letter, dated February 5, 1973, and a second one from October 23, 1973. As you can see from the following excerpt, that series of letters was unearthed along with a number of treasures from Isaac's past.

Yours, Isaac Asimov was published in 1995 by Doubleday Books. Sadly, Stanley passed away a few months before his cherished project saw print. We are grateful to him, though, for his insightful and entertaining tribute to his brother. And we are pleased to have the chance to publish a piece of this engaging book in the pages of *Asimov's Science Fiction* magazine.

—Sheila Williams

In the spring of 1977, the very first issue of Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine *was published.*

24 December 1976

As for the new magazine, having it bear my name was entirely the publisher's idea—to make it match the Ellery Queen and Alfred Hitchcock magazines. Of those two, Ellery Queen is *not* a figurehead but is actively shaping the field. Alfred Hitchcock is a complete figurehead, his only participation being his name and picture.

I will fall in between. I have no editorial expertise whatever, and no time or desire to be an editor even if it were imagined I could learn how. I will participate to the best of my ability.

But Isaac worried that the use of his name might be a problem.

1 March 1976

It is just possible that many science fiction fans would be deeply offended by any magazine bearing the title of a particular science fiction writer. It might strike them as being beneath the dignity of the field, or as being an unendurable example of arrogance on my part. It might even be that science fiction writers (who are, by and large, a very peculiar bunch, with skyscraper egos and no protective skin at all) might be reluctant to write for a magazine that by its very name is boosting the name and career of a competitor.

As it turned out, his worry was unfounded.

7 October 1986

After all since 1950, dozens of science fiction magazines have been started and of them all, *only Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* managed to survive for ten years (and still counting). We've had good editors and good publishing, but part of it, at least, is the use of my name.

At the memorial service for Isaac after his death, Sheila Williams, the managing editor of the magazine, recalled that she had met Isaac when she was sixteen years old after her father had written to Isaac saying that both of them were fans and wanted to meet him at an upcoming Star Trek *convention. This was Isaac's reply to Sheila's father:*

12 February 1973

If Sheila is as sweet as 16-year-olds usually are, there will be no problem at all in having a few minutes of conversation.

They did meet, and Isaac spent time with them. Sheila never forgot it and several months later asked Isaac's advice on which college to attend.

30 October 1973

I taught at Boston University and was always pleased with it. There are numerous science fiction fans in the Boston area, and they could offer a stimulating atmosphere in which to work on writing s.f.

After I sent Sheila copies of her father's and her letters to Isaac and Isaac's replies, she wrote:

10 March 1993

I can't believe you found them in all those letters. By a trick of memory, I'd thought that both letters were written by my father. I certainly wrote my letter requesting information about colleges at my dad's urging. Although I can't believe my audacity, it's great to finally have copies of this interchange that existed ten years before we actually became friends.

One of Isaac's lifelong friends was Fred Pohl. In 1979, Isaac was asked to write an appreciation of Pohl for a science fiction convention program.

TECHNOLOGY UPDATE

Fifteen years of microelectronic research makes conventional antennas a thing of the past!

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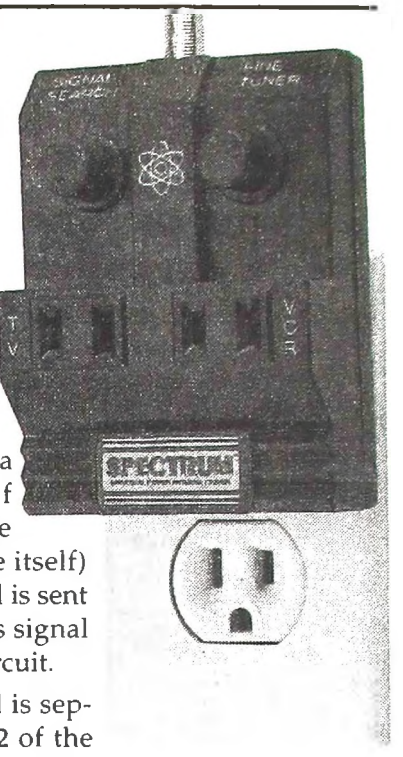

Fifteen years of microelectronics research has resulted in a remarkable device, the Spectrum Universal Antenna/Tuner, that makes conventional antennas obsolete.

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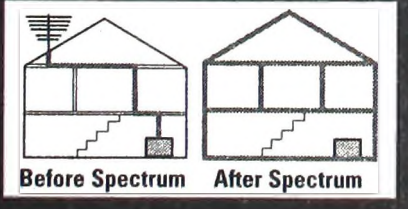

How does Spectrum use electrical wiring as an antenna? Believe it or not, Spectrum simply "activates" the giant antenna that already exists in your home. Essentially, it uses all of the wiring throughout your home's walls and ceilings to make an antenna as large as your house for unbelievably clear reception of local broadcasting.

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3 December 1979

What has Fred Pohl ever done for me? Let's see.

When I was 18, I met him as part of the Futurians, and we hung about a lot together, which made me feel right at home in the science fiction fan movement and encouraged me to keep trying to write. Fred went over my rejections and told me they were the best set of rejections he had ever seen, which was encouraging. He gave me advice (good advice) on writing even though he was only a few weeks older than I.

In 1940, he became the editor of *Astonishing Stories* and *Super-Science Stories* and bought half a dozen stories when I needed to make sales most. By the time he had finished his stint as editor, I was strong enough to carry on alone and sell to *Astounding* exclusively.

In 1949, he urged me (indeed, almost forced me) to submit my story *Pebble in the Sky* to Doubleday—thus initiating my career as a book writer. He was my agent till 1953 and was helpful at all times. After he ended his agency, I never had another agent. About 1951, he told me the real money was in writing nonfiction. I didn't believe him, but I didn't forget either.

He has always been my good friend over the decades.

I thought all this over and said to myself, "Yes, but what has he done for me *lately?*"

Arthur C. Clarke and Isaac respected each other highly, but that didn't stop them from an occasional needle. In 1976, Clarke wanted to include an introduction that he had made of Isaac in a book of essays. He said he would include Isaac's reply and welcomed "any additional insults." He also said he planned to cut down on his writing and lecturing. Isaac replied:

28 June 1976

By all means include both your introduction and my gentle riposte. I wouldn't for the world add more insults, for I love you too much, as you well know. Besides, if I answer gently, everyone will be sorry for me and will hate you.

Delighted to hear you won't be writing or lecturing. I never could stand the competition. Now don't change your mind; I'm going to carry on for both of us. In return, you can have all your royalties forwarded to me. It will be a chore taking care of the money, investing it, paying taxes on it, but what are friends *for?*

15 March 1986

I am always glad to hear from you, if only to know that you are alive and well and (I trust) not writing books. Not that it does any good. Half a year ago, Carl Sagan published *Contact* and that knocked half the sales off *Robots and Empire.* (These days, who can afford to buy *two* hard-covers?)

19 November 1990

I note that your books disappear the moment they hit the shelves,

but I am told this is because the dealers throw them away at once. This news has been kept from you because of your advanced age and debility, but I cannot allow you to live a lie.

The next was scribbled on a Time *magazine clipping that quoted the passenger of an airplane that crashed saying that he was reading a Clarke science fiction novel when the crash occurred.*

9 August 1989

He should have read an Asimov book. Then he'd have slept through the crash.

Sprague de Camp was one of his closest friends for more than 50 years. Over the years, he wrote de Camp many letters. Here's a sampling.

24 December 1966

I am on a de Camp binge. On impulse I reread *The Bronze God of Rhodes* and enjoyed it tremendously. So I passed on at once to *An Elephant for Aristotle,* and now I am two-thirds through *The Dragon of the Ishtar Gate.* You are undoubtedly the best writer of historical fiction that ever lived. Your stories have verve, your people aren't creaky historical figures—they're moderns like ourselves. What's more, you carefully don't betray your own hindsight. I love you, Sprague.

13 December 1967

Well, old boy, you cost me a day's writing time. I took Robyn to the hospital for a routine checkup and, knowing I would have to wait, I took *The Great Monkey Trial* with me and began reading. I should have known better, for I have had experience with your books. I read and read and read and have just finished and haven't done a stitch of work in the interim. I haven't even taken care of my mail, and you know how compulsive I am about that.

After the death of a mutual friend in an automobile accident, Isaac wrote:

7 February 1970

Sprague, in case anything happens unexpectedly either to me or to you, can I tell you now that I have loved you for 30 years and that in all that time you have never done anything that has in the least displeased me or made me unhappy; that I have tried never to cause you displeasure or unhappiness, and have certainly never done so wittingly.

Here's what he wrote about de Camp to others.

11 February 1972

Sprague de Camp has discovered a time machine. When I first met him in 1939, he was tall, handsome, dignified and learned. And he still is. People looking at a group photograph taken in 1940 say, "Who's that skinny guy? Asimov? Who's that funny little pointed-chin fellow? Del Rey? Who's that kid? Anderson? And there's

Sprague de Camp." There's never any question of Sprague. In 30 years, he hasn't changed. Well, he's grown a beard and it's a little gray, but that's just a detail.

On Harlan Ellison

21 June 1968

I called Larry Ashmead [his editor at Doubleday] to tell him that I had finished every last bit of my index work and was sending it to him by special delivery. A strange voice got on the line and announced himself as Larry's new assistant. He began to tell me that a check over my book sales had shown that I was doing much worse than had been expected and that Doubleday was going to have to make an agonizing reappraisal about me.

I said he was pulling my leg and to let me talk to Larry. He said he was trying to break the news to me gently and Larry didn't want to talk to me. And I said (getting more nervous by the moment) that I could hear Larry laughing in the background.

It was Harlan Ellison, of course. He was in the office. I just happened to call, and it was his idea of a joke. Oh, boy, talk about picking vulnerable spots. But wait, the opportunity will come, and I will get even.

Isaac sponsored Ben Bova's membership in the National Association of Science Writers.

7 October 1964

Ben falls into the same category as I do. He has written science fiction stories and also some very good science books for the layman. He is thoroughly qualified. He is not, of course, as experienced or as talented or as handsome as I myself am. But then—who is?

On Ray Bradbury

7 August 1968

Ray and I were born in the same year, took the same path into science fiction and, as far as I know, share the same political views. There is, however, one difference. Ray has a pronounced antipathy and distrust for science, and I have a pronounced sympathy and trust for it. He hates the prospect of a high-machine future, and I love it.

7 January 1972

Although I am the best writer in the world, I am no Ray Bradbury. "Switch on the Night" simply charmed me to death. I loved it.

15 October 1988

I heartily concur with the suggestion that Ray Bradbury be awarded the Grand Master classification by the Science Fiction Writers Association. He was the first of the magazine science fiction writers (even counting Bob Heinlein) to be recognized by the outside world, and his "Martian Chronicles" went a long way toward putting us on the map. I would have felt uneasy about accepting my own Grand Master

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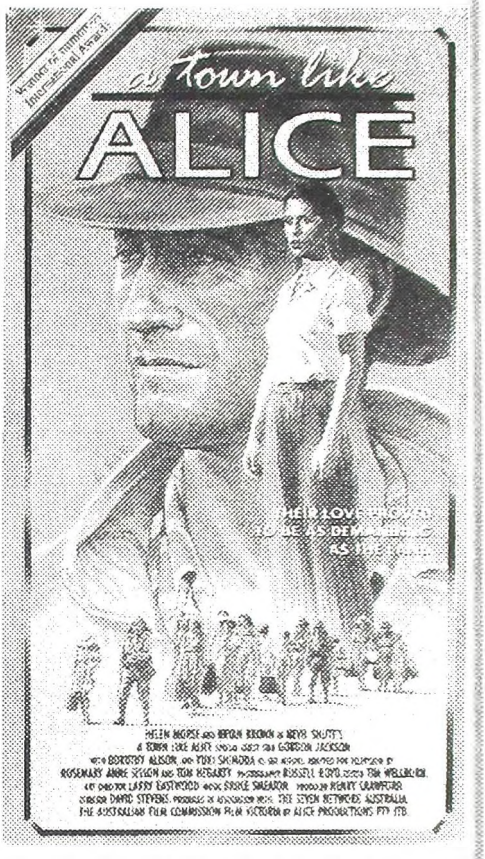
A TOWN LIKE ALICE



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award were I not well aware that I was half a year older than Ray.

On Robert Heinlein

31 July 1976

I can't honestly say that Bob Heinlein inspired my first efforts in science fiction, for I had three stories published at the time Bob's first appeared ["Lifeline" in the August 1939 issue of *Astounding*].

However, I know a good thing when I see it. As soon as "Lifeline" appeared, I realized I had a model to copy and I copied as hard as I could. I never really managed to make myself as good as Bob (who did?), but it kept me pointed in the right direction. So I'm grateful to him as we all are—as fans, certainly, and as professionals even more so.

Willy Ley was a fellow science writer whom Isaac admired greatly. He wrote about Ley:

10 July 1969

I cannot help but feel that Willy himself would have considered the timing of his death tragic. After his involvement with the space program, after the manner in which he sold rocketry to the whole world even in years when "respectable" engineers would not dream of considering such matters, it seems just too frustrating that he should die three weeks before the lunar landing.

Robert Silverberg, in a letter to Silverberg:

3 March 1970

Listen, your history on Zionism got a very good report in *Publishers Weekly*. I hate you! If you're going to compete with me in quantity and variety and be a dozen years younger than me, can't you at least fall far short of me in quality? It seems to me to be a reasonable request.

In another letter to Silverberg, who was then writing a novelization of Isaac's famous short story "Nightfall":

21 April 1989

To tell you in writing, so that it will be impossible for me to deny it later and say that you must have misled me: I think your outline for the novelization of "Nightfall" is simply superb. Absolutely wonderful. It made me very happy.

On Clifford Simak, in a letter to Simak:

12 May 1984

I was 18 years old when we first started corresponding. You were 34. Forty-five years have passed since then, and we are still corresponding, I see. You were already one of Campbell's hopefuls when we started; I had not yet made a sale. Now you are the beloved patriarch of the field and a Grand Master, and I know what it is to have placed straight science fiction books on the best-seller lists. We have come a long way, and I presume neither of us has any complaints.

I have made no secret of the fact that if I have ever deliberately copied anyone's style of writing, it is yours.

I don't suppose you know what you've meant to me, Cliff, and it is difficult to explain. You encouraged me when I was beginning. You wrote me letters that made me feel part of the science fiction fraternity before I was part of it. You were a friend who was always kind and brotherly. I never saw your name on a story or book without feeling warm. And, as you know, I never missed a chance to express my debt to you and my admiration of you in print, right down to the present.

You mean a great deal to Janet, Cliff, quite independently of her relationship to me. You are, by all odds, her favorite science fiction writer and have been since long before she met me. She has every one of your books and keeps them all. Yours are the *only* science fiction novels she not only reads but periodically rereads. (When I say "only," I mean that she does *not* reread mine.)

On Ted Sturgeon

8 May 1985

It is now almost half a century since John Campbell took over the editorship of *Astounding* and began the "Golden Age." But I remember it as though it were yesterday. God, what exciting days those were.

Little by little, John gathered a stable of writers and learned the trick of keeping us rubbing our noses against the grindstone. One thing he did, in my case, was to tell me what the other members of his stable were doing.

The one he mentioned with the greatest affection was Theodore Sturgeon. I can see him grinning now as he would hint at the manifold pleasures of something upcoming by Ted.

How I watched for his stories myself. I remember "It" and "Ether Breather" (his first) and "Shottle Bop" and "Yesterday was Monday" and "Killdozer"—and how eagerly I read them and how hopelessly I decided I couldn't match him. And I never could. He had a delicacy of touch that I couldn't duplicate if my fingers were feathers.

On Jack Williamson

24 February 1979

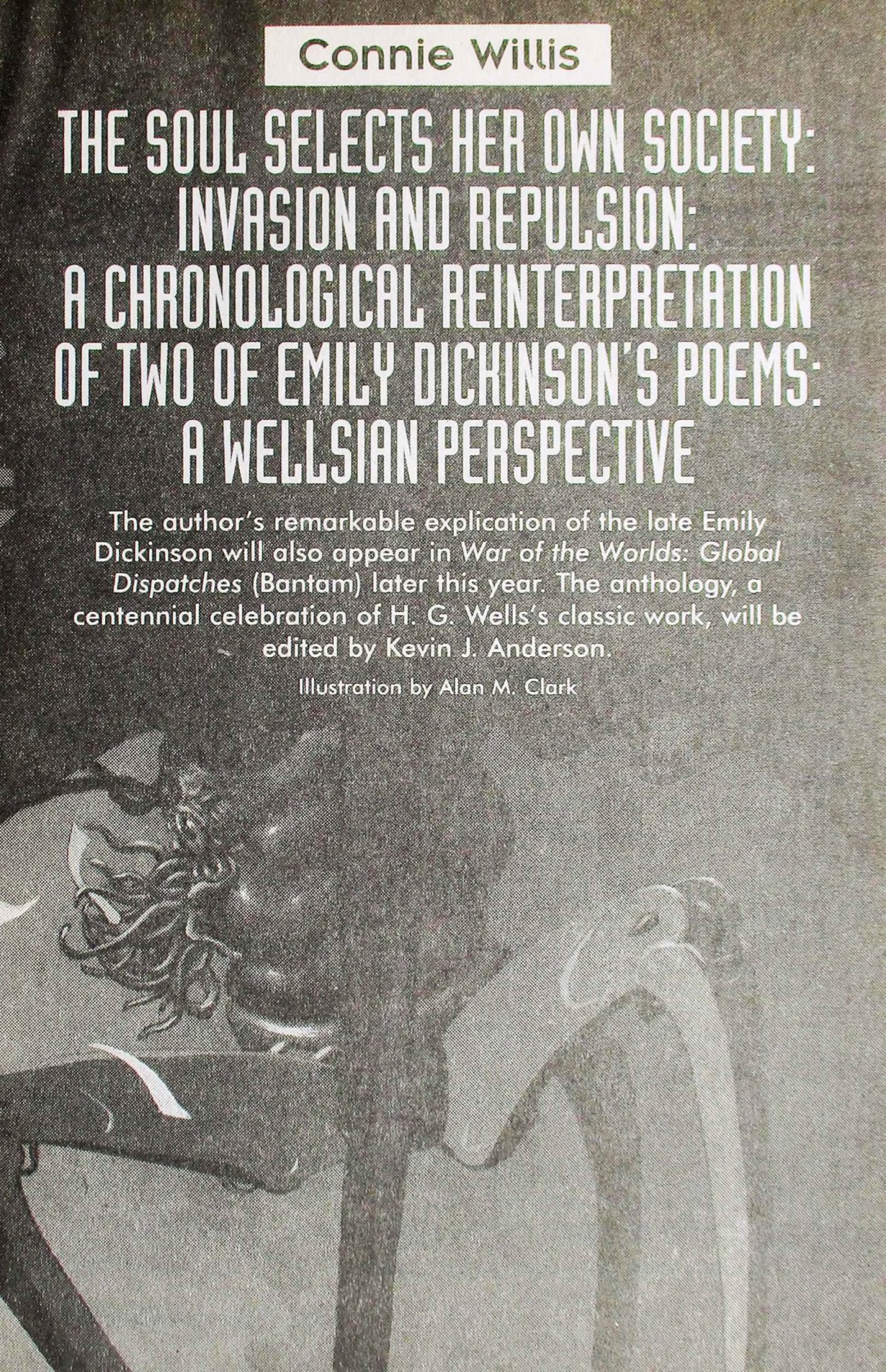
I first met Jack in 1939. When my first story, "Marooned Off Vesta" was published, he sent me a postcard congratulating me and offering me a "welcome to the ranks." I cannot say how much that meant to me from one of the writers I respected most. It was typical of his kindness and his gentle heart. I have seen him perhaps five times all told in 40 years, but I wear him always near my heart. ●

Connie Willis

THE SOUL SELECTS HER OWN SOCIETY: INVASION AND REPULSION: A CHRONOLOGICAL REINTERPRETATION OF TWO OF EMILY DICKINSON'S POEMS: A WELLSIAN PERSPECTIVE

The author's remarkable explication of the late Emily Dickinson will also appear in *War of the Worlds: Global Dispatches* (Bantam) later this year. The anthology, a centennial celebration of H. G. Wells's classic work, will be edited by Kevin J. Anderson.

Illustration by Alan M. Clark



Until recently it was thought that Emily Dickinson's poetic output ended in 1886, the year she died. Poems 186B and 272?, however, suggest that not only did she write poems at a later date, but that she was involved in the "great and terrible events"[1] of 1897.

The poems in question originally came to light in 1991[2], while Nathan Fleece was working on his doctorate. Fleece, who found the poems[3] under a hedge in the Dickinsons' backyard, classified the poems as belonging to Dickinson's Early or Only Slightly Eccentric Period, but a recent examination of the works[4] has yielded up an entirely different interpretation of the circumstances under which the poems were written.

The sheets of paper on which the poems were written are charred around the edges, and that of number 272? has a large round hole burnt in it. Martha Hodge-Banks claims that said charring and hole were caused by "a pathetic attempt to age the paper and forgetting to watch the oven,"[5] but the large number of dashes makes it clear they were written by Dickinson, as well as the fact that the poems are almost totally indecipherable. Dickinson's unreadable handwriting has been authenticated by any number of scholars, including Elmo Spencer in *Emily Dickinson: Handwriting or Hieroglyphics?,* and M.P. Cursive, who wrote, "Her a's look like c's, her e's look like 2's, and the whole thing looks like chicken scratches."[6]

The charring seemed to indicate either that the poems had been written while smoking[7] or in the midst of some catastrophe, and I began examining the text for clues.

Fleece had deciphered Number 272? as beginning, "I never saw a friend—/I never saw a moom—," which made no sense at all,[8] and on closer examination I saw that the stanza actually read:

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1. For a full account, see H.G. Wells, *The War of the Worlds,* Oxford University Press, 1898.
2. The details of the discovery are recounted in *Desperation and Discovery: The Unusual Number of Lost Manuscripts Located by Doctoral Candidates,* by J. Marple, Reading Railway Press, 1993.
3. Actually a poem and a poem fragment consisting of a four-line stanza and a single word fragment* from the middle of the second stanza.
   *Or word. See later on in this paper.
4. While I was working on *my* dissertation.
5. Dr. Banks's assertion that "the paper was manufactured in 1990 and the ink was from a Flair tip pen," is merely airy speculation.*
   *See "Carbon Dating Doesn't Prove Anything," by Jeremiah Habakkuk, in *Creation Science for Fun and Profit,* Golden Slippers Press, 1974.
6. The pathetic nature of her handwriting is also addressed in *Impetus to Reform: Emily Dickinson's Effect on the Palmer Method,* and in "Depth, Dolts, and Teeth: An Alternate Translation of Emily Dickinson's Death Poems," in which it is argued that Number 712 actually begins, "Because I could not stoop for darts," and recounts an arthritic evening at the local pub.
7. Dickinson is not known to have smoked, except during her Late or Downright Peculiar Period.
8. Of course, neither does, "How pomp surpassing ermine." Or, "A dew sufficed itself."

"I never saw a fiend—
I never Saw a bomb—
And yet of both of them I Dreamed—
While in The—dreamless tomb—"

a much more authentic translation, particularly in regard to the rhyme scheme. "Moom" and "tomb" actually rhyme, which is something Dickinson hardly ever did, preferring near-rhymes such as "mat/gate," "tune/sun," and "balm/hermaphrodite."

The second stanza was more difficult, as it occupied the area of the round hole, and the only readable portion was a group of four letters farther down that read, "ulla."[9]

This was assumed by Fleece to be part of a longer word such as "bullary," (a convocation of popes),[10] or possibly "dullard" or "hullabaloo."[11]

I, however, immediately recognized "ulla" as the word H.G. Wells had reported hearing the dying Martians utter, a sound he described as "a sobbing alternation of two notes[12] . . . a desolating cry."

"Ulla" was a clear reference to the 1897 invasion by the Martians, previously thought to have been confined to England, Missouri, and the University of Paris.[13] The poem fragment, along with 186B, clearly indicated that the Martians had landed in Amherst and that they had met Emily Dickinson.

At first glance, this seems an improbable scenario due to both the Martians' and Emily Dickinson's dispositions. Dickinson was a recluse who didn't meet anybody, preferring to hide upstairs when neighbors came to call and to float notes down on them.[14] Various theories have been advanced for her self-imposed hermitude, including Bright's Disease, an unhappy love affair, eye trouble, and bad skin. T.L. Mensa suggests the simpler theory that all the rest of the Amherstonians were morons.[15]

None of these explanations would have made it likely that she would like Martians any better than Amherstates, and there is the added difficulty that, having died in 1886, she would also have been badly decomposed.

The Martians present additional difficulties. The opposite of recluses, they were in the habit of arriving noisily, attracting reporters, and blast-

9. Or possibly "ciee." Or "vole."
10. Unlikely considering her Calvinist upbringing.
11. Or the Australian city, Ulladulla. Dickinson's poems are full of references to Australia. W.G. Mathilda has theorized from this that "the great love of Dickinson's life was neither Higginson nor Judge Lord, but Mel Gibson." See *Emily Dickinson: The Billabong Connection*, by C. Dundee, Outback Press, 1985.
12. See Rod McKuen.
13. Where Jules Verne was working on *his* doctorate.
14. The notes contained charming, often enigmatic sentiments such as, "Which shall it be—Geraniums or Tulips?" and "Go away—and Shut the door When—you Leave."
15. See *Halfwits and Imbeciles: Poetic Evidence of Emily Dickinson's Opinion of Her Neighbors.*

ing at everybody in the vicinity. There is no record of their having landed in Amherst, though several inhabitants mention unusually loud thunderstorms in their diaries,[16] and Louisa May Alcott, in nearby Concord, wrote in her journal, "Wakened suddenly last night by a loud noise to the west. Couldn't get back to sleep for worrying. Should have had Jo marry Laurie. To Do: Write sequel in which Amy dies. Serve her right for burning manuscript."

There is also indirect evidence for the landing. Amherst, frequently confused with Lakehurst, was obviously the inspiration for Orson Welles's setting the radio version of "War of the Worlds" in New Jersey.[17] In addition, a number of the tombstones in West Cemetery are tilted at an angle, and, in some cases, have been knocked down, making it clear that the Martians landed not only in Amherst, but in West Cemetery, very near Dickinson's grave.

Wells describes the impact of the shell[18] as producing "a blinding glare of vivid green light" followed by "such a concussion as I have never heard before or since." He reports that the surrounding dirt "splashed," creating a deep pit and exposing drainpipes and house foundation. Such an impact in West Cemetery would have uprooted the surrounding coffins and broken them open, and the resultant light and noise clearly would have been enough to "wake the dead," including the slumbering Dickinson.

That she was thus awakened, and that she considered the event an invasion of her privacy, is made clear in the longer poem, Number 186B, of which the first stanza reads:

"I scarce was settled In the grave—
When came—unwelcome guests—
Who pounded on My coffin lid—
Intruders—in the dust—"[19]

Why the "unwelcome guests" did not hurt her,[20] in light of their usual behavior, and how she was able to vanquish them are less apparent, and we must turn to H.G. Wells's account of the Martians for answers.

On landing, Wells tells us, the Martians were completely helpless due

16. Virtually everyone in Amherst kept a diary, containing entries such as "Always knew she'd turn out to be a great poet," and "Full moon last night. Caught a glimpse of her out in her garden planting peas. Completely deranged."

17. The inability of people to tell Orson Welles and H.G. Wells apart lends credence to Dickinson's opinion of humanity. (See Footnote 15.)

18. Not the one at the beginning of the story, which everybody knows about, the one that practically landed on him in the middle of the book which everybody missed because they'd already turned off the radio and were out running up and down the streets screaming, "The end is here! The Martians are coming!"*

*Thus proving Emily was right in her assessment of the populace.

19. See *Sound, Fury, and Frogs: Emily Dickinson's Seminal Influence on William Faulkner*, by W. Snopes, Yoknapatawpha Press, 1955.

20. She was, of course, already dead, which meant the damage they could inflict was probably minimal.

to Earth's greater gravity, and remained so until they were able to build their fighting machines. During this period they would have posed no threat to Dickinson except that of company.[21]

Secondly, they were basically big heads. Wells describes them as having eyes, a beak, some tentacles, and "a single large tympanic drum" at the back of the head which functioned as an ear. Wells theorized that the Martians were "descended from beings not unlike ourselves, by a gradual development of brain and hands . . . at the expense of the body." He concluded that, without the body's vulnerability and senses, the brain would become "selfish and cruel" and take up mathematics,[22] but Dickinson's effect on them suggests that the over-enhanced development of their neocortexes had turned them instead into poets.

The fact that they picked off people with their heat rays, sucked human blood, and spewed poisonous black smoke over entire counties, would seem to contraindicate poetic sensibility, but look how poets act. Take Shelley, for instance, who went off and left his first wife to drown herself in the Serpentine so he could marry a woman who wrote monster movies. Or Byron. The only people who had a kind word to say about him were his dogs.[23] Take Robert Frost.[24]

The Martians' identity as poets is corroborated by the fact that they landed seven shells in Great Britain, three in the Lake District,[25] and none at all in Liverpool. It may have determined their decision to land in Amherst.

But they had reckoned without Dickinson's determination and literary technique, as Number 186B makes clear.[26] Stanza Two reads:

I wrote a letter—to the fiends—
And bade them All be—gone—
In simple words—writ plain And clear—
I vant to be alone.'"

"Writ plain and clear" is obviously an exaggeration, but it is manifest that Dickinson wrote a note and delivered it to the Martians, as the next line makes even more evident:

"They (indecipherable)[27] it with an awed dismay—"

Dickinson may have read it aloud or floated the note down to them in

21. Which she considered a considerable threat. "If the butcher boy should come now, I would jump into the flour barrel,"* she wrote in 1873.
*If she was in the habit of doing this, it may account for her always appearing in white.
22. Particularly non-linear differential equations.
23. See "Lord Byron's *Don Juan*: The Mastiff as Muse" by C. Harold.
24. He didn't like people either. See "Mending Wall," *The Complete Works,* Random House. Frost preferred barbed wire fences with spikes on top to walls.
25. See "Semiotic Subterfuge in Wordsworth's 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud': A Dialectic Approach," by N. Compos Mentis, *Postmodern Review,* June 1984.
26. Sort of.
27. The word is either "read" or "heard" or possibly "pacemaker."

their landing pit in her usual fashion, or she may have unscrewed the shell and tossed it in, like a hand grenade.

Whatever the method of delivery, however, the result was "awed dismay" and then retreat, as the next line indicates:

"They—promptly took—their leave—"

It has been argued that Dickinson would have had no access to writing implements in the graveyard, but this fails to take into consideration the Victorian lifestyle. Dickinson's burial attire was a white dress, and all Victorian dresses had pockets.[28]

During the funeral Emily's sister Lavinia placed two heliotropes in her sister's hand, whispering that they were for her to take to the Lord. She may also have slipped a pencil and some Post-its into the coffin, or Dickinson, in the habit of writing and distributing notes, may simply have planned ahead.[29]

In addition, grave poems[30] are a well-known part of literary tradition. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, in the throes of grief after the death of his beloved Elizabeth Siddall, entwined poems in her auburn hair as she lay in her coffin.[31]

However the writing implements came to be there, Dickinson obviously made prompt and effective use of them. She scribbled down several stanzas and sent them to the Martians, who were so distressed at them that they decided to abort their mission and return to Mars.

The exact cause of this deadly effect has been much debated, with several theories being advanced. Wells was convinced that microbes killed the Martians who landed in England, who had no defense against Earth's bacteria, but such bacteria would have taken several days to infect the Martians, so it was obviously Dickinson's poems that caused them to leave, not dysentery.

Spencer suggests that her illegible handwriting led the Martians to misread her message and take it as some sort of ultimatum. A. Huyfen argues that the advanced Martians, being good at punctuation, were appalled by her profligate use of dashes and random capitalizing of letters. S.W. Lubbock proposes the theory that they were unnerved by the fact that all of her poems can be sung to the tune of "The Yellow Rose of Texas."[32]

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28. Also pleats, tucks, ruching, flounces, frills, ruffles, and passementerie.*
*See "Pockets as Political Statement: The Role of Clothing in Early Victorian Feminism," by E. and C. Pankhurst, Angry Women's Press, 1978.

29. A good writer is never without pencil and paper.*
*Or laptop.

30. See "Posthumous Poems" in *Literary Theories that Don't Hold Water* by H. Houdini.

31. Two years later, no longer quite so grief-stricken and thinking of all that lovely money, he dug her up and got them back.*
*I told you poets behaved badly.

32. Try it. No, really. "Be-e-e-e-cause I could not stop for Death, He kindly stopped for me-e-e." See?*

It seems obvious, however, that the most logical theory is that the Martians were wounded to the heart by Dickinson's use of near-rhymes, which all advanced civilizations rightly abhor. Number 186B contains two particularly egregious examples: "gone/alone" and "guests/dust," and the burnt hole in 272? may indicate something even worse.

The near-rhyme theory is corroborated by H.G. Wells's account of the damage done to London, a city in which Tennyson ruled supreme, and by an account of a near-landing in Ong, Nebraska, recorded by Muriel Addleson:

"We were having our weekly meeting of the Ong Ladies Literary Society when there was a dreadful noise outside, a rushing sound, like something falling off the Grange Hall. Henrietta Muddie was reading Emily Dickinson's 'I Taste a Liquor Never Brewed,' out loud, and we all raced to the window but couldn't see anything except a lot of dust,[33] so Henrietta started reading again and there was a big whoosh, and a big round metal thing like a cigar[34] rose straight up in the air and disappeared."

It is significant that the poem in question is Number 214, which rhymes[35] "pearl" and "alcohol."[36]

Dickinson saved Amherst from Martian invasion and then, as she says in the final two lines of 186B, "rearranged" her "grassy bed—/And Turned—and went To sleep."

She does not explain how the poems got from the cemetery to the hedge, and we may never know for sure,[37] as we may never know whether she was being indomitably brave or merely crabby.

What we do know is that these poems, along with a number of her other poems,[38] document a heretofore unguessed-at Martian invasion. Poems 186B and 272?, therefore, should be reassigned to the Very Late or

*Not all of Dickinson's poems can be sung to "The Yellow Rose of Texas." ** Numbers 2, 18, and 1411 can be sung to "The Itsy-Bitsy Spider."

**Could her choice of tunes be a coded reference to the unfortunate Martian landing in Texas? See "Night of the Cooters" by Howard Waldrop.

33. Normal to Ong, Nebraska.

34. See Freud.

35. Sort of.

36. The near-rhyme theory also explains why Dickinson responded with such fierceness when Thomas Wentworth Higginson changed "pearl" to "jewel." She knew, as he could not, that the fate of the world might someday rest on her inability to rhyme.

37. For an intriguing possibility, see, "The Literary Litterbug: Emily Dickinson's Note-Dropping as a Response to Thoreau's Environmentalism," P. Walden, *Transcendentalist Review*, 1990.

38. Number 187's "awful rivet" is clearly a reference to the Martian cylinder. Number 258's "There's a certain slant of light" echoes Wells's "blinding glare of green light," and its "affliction/Sent us of the air" obviously refers to the landing. Such allusions indicate that as many as fifty-five* of the poems were written at a later date than originally supposed, and that the entire chronology and numbering system of the poems needs to be reconsidered.

*Significantly enough, the age Emily Dickinson was when she died.

Deconstructionist Period, not only to give them their proper place as Dickinson's last and most significant poems, but also so that the full symbolism intended by Dickinson can be seen in their titles. The properly placed poems will be Numbers 1775 and 1776, respectively, a clear Dickinsian reference to the Fourth of July,[39] and to the second Independence Day she brought about by banishing[40] the Martians from Amherst. ●

NOTE: It is unfortunate that Wells didn't know about the deadly effect of near-rhymes. He could have grabbed a copy of the *Poems,* taken it to the landing pit, read a few choice lines of "The Bustle in a House," and saved everybody a lot of trouble.

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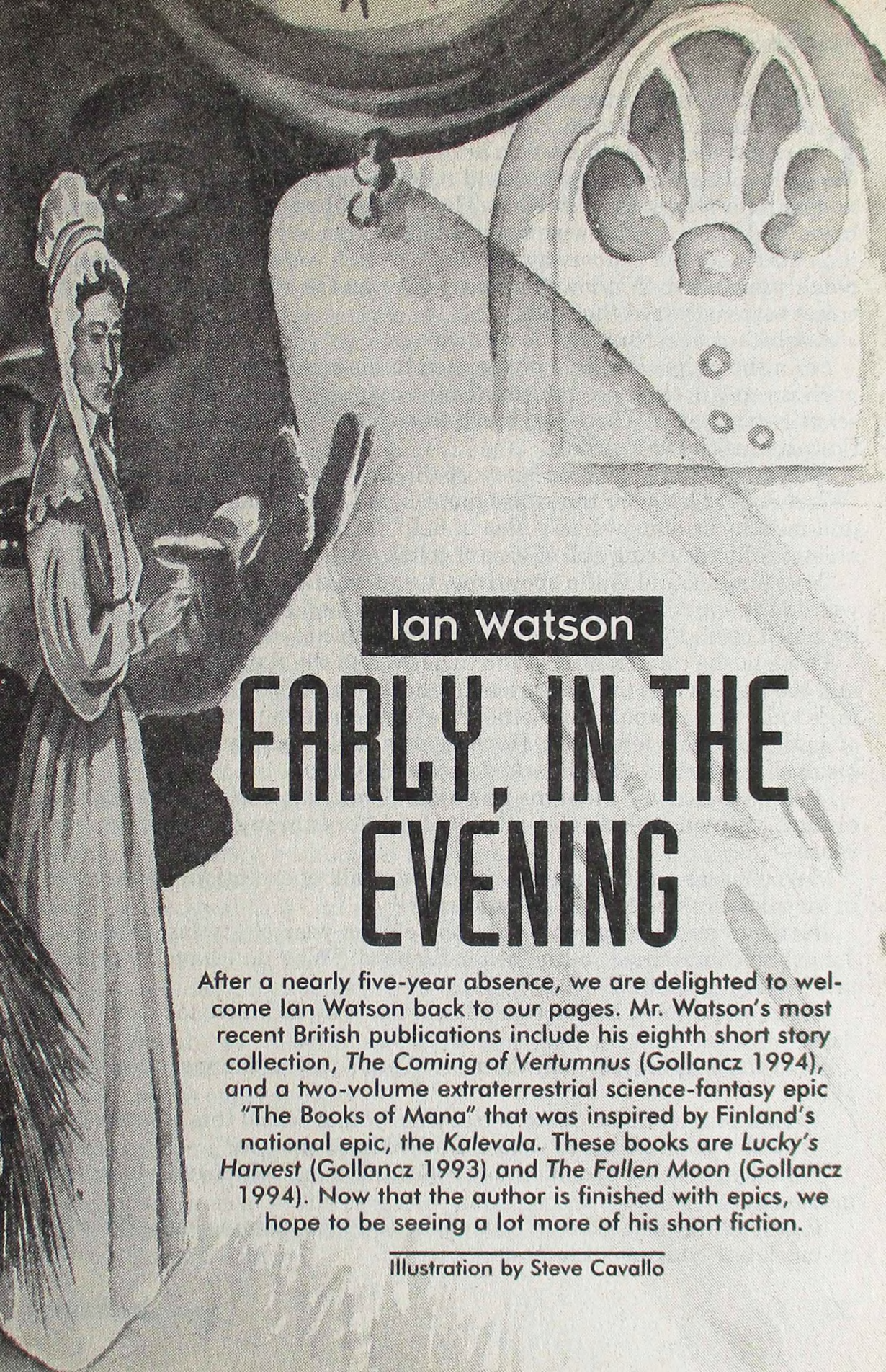
39. A holiday Dickinson did not celebrate because of its social nature, although she was spotted in 1881 lighting a cherry bomb on Mabel Dodd's porch and running away.*

*Which may be why the Martian landing attracted so little attention. The Amherstodes may have assumed it was Em up to her old tricks again.

40. There is compelling evidence that the Martians, thwarted in New England, went to Long Island. This theory will be the subject of my next paper,* "The Green Light at the End of Daisy's Dock: Evidence of Martian Invasion in F. Scott Fitzgeralds' *The Great Gatsby.*"

*I'm up for tenure.

We appreciate comments about the magazine, and would like to hear from more of our readers. Editorial correspondence should include the writer's name and mailing address, even if you use e-mail. Letters can be e-mailed to 71154.662@compuserve.com or posted to Letters to the Editor, *Asimov's,* 1540 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10036. Letters may be shortened and edited for publication. The e-mail address is for editorial correspondence *only*—questions about subscriptions should be directed to Box 5130, Harlan, IA 51593-5130.



Ian Watson

EARLY, IN THE EVENING

After a nearly five-year absence, we are delighted to welcome Ian Watson back to our pages. Mr. Watson's most recent British publications include his eighth short story collection, *The Coming of Vertumnus* (Gollancz 1994), and a two-volume extraterrestrial science-fantasy epic "The Books of Mana" that was inspired by Finland's national epic, the *Kalevala*. These books are *Lucky's Harvest* (Gollancz 1993) and *The Fallen Moon* (Gollancz 1994). Now that the author is finished with epics, we hope to be seeing a lot more of his short fiction.

Illustration by Steve Cavallo

Even early in the morning St. Thomas's Church consisted of a nave and chancel. However, Father Hopkins waited until almost noon before delivering his Snowdrop Sermon. By then the church had undergone numerous extensions and renovations. A south aisle had been added, followed by a north aisle. The chancel had been rebuilt. Then a tower had arisen—otherwise how could Hopkins have rung a bell to summon his flock? North doorway and chancel arch were remodeled. A south porch was added. Windows became larger as the sun rose higher. Buttresses strengthened the walls.

A substantial setting for his sermon!

From the pulpit Hopkins proclaimed to his congregation: "Snowdrops push up spears through iron soil. They enter a world which is, as yet, so scantily populated. There's so much free space wherein to be the first to flower, thus the first to die.

"What does the snowdrop know of the riot of summer?" he preached. "What does it know of the subsequent heat? Would that hot riot of the mid-months be a snowdrop's idea of hell? Or does the snowdrop inhabit an eternally recurring hell of vacant cold?

"How time-bound is the snowdrop, never to know the full cycle of the year in the way that people perceive a full year—!" He faltered, perplexed by which tense to adopt. "In the way that people *used* to perceive. . . ."

Those in the congregation—the Lucases and the Randalls, the Smiths and the Bakers and the Baxters and others—were tired from their morning's toil. Since it would be another five hours or so until the development of radio, let alone television, Hopkins was their consolation, even if the bleak cheer that he offered lacked entire conviction.

"*Used* to perceive," Hopkins repeated. "Time has betrayed the Earth, and all thereon who dwell—who evolved here throughout millions of years—"

Maybe it was a little early in the day for talk of evolution. Yet several in his audience nodded understandingly.

Jonathon and Margaret Lucas, the eleven year old twins, fidgeted. Jonathon complained to his father Richard: "Why do I have to gather muck every morning?"

Margaret pestered her mother Elisabeth: "Why do I have to *weed* every day?"

Jonathon dug his sister in the ribs. "That's just in the mornings, stupid."

"I'm not stupid! I'll be doing better than you in school this afternoon."

"Why do we have to go to school, Dad? What's the use?"

"Would you rather spend all day collecting dung?" Richard whispered grimly.

"How could I spend all day?" asked the boy with irksome logic. "There's no muck left lying about later on."

"In that case," retorted his father, "you must collect muck while it's available."

"It's *shitty*."

"Watch your tongue! You just gather those droppings to scatter on the fallows after they've been ploughed. That's your task, son. We all have tasks."

"We needn't—"

Up in the pulpit, which was still carved of stone, Father Hopkins blinked. Unaided as yet by spectacles, he peered toward the box-pew the Lucases were sharing with the Baxters.

"Sufficient unto the hour is the toil thereof!" he called out. "Believe me, lad. All of you harken to me: our mundane lives are so much more *comprehensive* now than ever they were before. Our lives are so much more extensive, even universal, by the grace of Gaea. Each day we embrace such a gamut of experiences. What does the snowdrop know of such rich diversity, such a varying pageant? Isn't this how we should view our plight?"

Was Hopkins the same priest as once he had been, before the treason of time? Hopkins retained an oratorical bent, as well as a duty of care. However, he had abandoned all Christian theology. Jesus and God the Father and the Holy Ghost were irrelevant to what had occurred. Gaea, on the other hand, might be germane.

A few days earlier Hopkins had attempted to explain how and why this might be.

"Evolution," he had declared, "is undergoing a strange recapitulation. Do I mean evolution as such? Forgive me, that is silly talk! It is our *history* that is undergoing recapitulation day by day. Our recent social history in all its circumstances." Hopkins had been a leading light of the local Historical Society, and indeed come evening-time he still was.

"Throughout history," he confided, "the *concept* of God evolved. It is in this sense I suggest that God might well now be viewed, ahem, as devolving into Gaea—as a more primitive power of seasons and crops reasserts Herself. Should we not find this suggestive? As for the *miraculous* nature of what besets us, alas, sophisticated theology outgrew the magical—"

"Mummy, why do I need to spend the mornings weeding the same old weeds? Why can't we sleep in and get up late? Why can't we wait till we can drive to the supermarket—?"

In the morning it was always early. Roughly eight hundred years early. In the morning the Lucas's home was a thatched hovel of mud-and-wattle. So were most of the other devolved houses each behind fence or hedge, though the stockaded Manor with its ox-stalls and barns and buttery was of sturdy stone.

Fields of long narrow strips extended to the great woodland where pigs foraged. Sheep and cattle grazed the common meadow. Geese honked around the fish ponds.

Mornings could be an optimistic time for many souls. People were full of expectation for later in the day, though first there was hard labor. Ewes to milk. Butter to churn. Fallows to plough, manure to scatter. Wood to cut. Garden plots of leeks and onions and garlic and mint and parsley to weed and tend.

Might the Lucas family not simply laze around and wait until evening when their house was of bricks and mortar with a car parked in the driveway? Likewise the Smiths and Baxters, the Bakers and the Randalls?

Naturally Richard and Elisabeth had discussed this when the kids were finally watching television.

Children did not experience to the same degree as adults the necessity to perform—to involve oneself fully and methodically in the sequence of each day. Partly the grown-ups were succumbing to group pressure. Yet there was also a personal, almost ontological aspect, powerfully superstitious.

"If we don't all follow the sequence," Richard had said, "then the sequence mightn't carry us along with it."

"We might miss out on the results," agreed Elisabeth.

Of course everyone lived for the results. The freezer food, the microwave oven, the phone, the soft bed—which, come the morning, would once again be a sack stuffed with straw.

In the afternoons industrialization occured. In its own way industry was dirty and fatiguing. Yet it augured a progressively neater and easier world. Where the strip-fields and woodland had once been, would stand estates of houses and zones of light industry. Newspapers would appear around four o'clock. By six o'clock there was radio; by six-thirty, television.

And so many more people too! What had been a large village would have grown into a town. The Lucases would be able to invite their closest friends Paul and Sally Devizes over.

Closest friends, nearest neighbors—though only later in the day. Paul and Sally did not share the earlier hours with the Lucases. A science program on television had hypothesized that small disconnected bubbles of existence progressively combined into bigger bubbles that all finally merged. The past had frothed; the past had foamed. All of those earlier micro-bubbles were synchronous in some higher dimension. They shared the same historical past. Yet in ordinary dimensionality the occupants simply did not interact.

Thus there was no contradiction in shared experience: of strip-fields and hovels, of common meadow and cattle, of work and woodland, of the

rutted muddy tracks. Nonetheless, each bubble remained a world unto itself until the bubbles joined and people were reunited with one another—as well as with their real homes and their cars and their electronics.

While the Lucases and the Devizes had been watching that science show about time-bubbles in Richard and Elisabeth's lounge, Jonathon and Margaret were horsing around upstairs with Paul and Sally's lad Philip. The kids were out of the way.

Paul Devizes joked to Richard, "Suppose I was to stay here tonight? Suppose you were to sleep at our place, Rich! Tomorrow morning would I be in your bubble, and would you be in mine? Until the evening came!"

"That reminds me of some Dylan song," said Sally.

Elisabeth frowned. "Father Hopkins wouldn't approve."

"From what you say," hinted Paul, "your Father Hopkins is getting into paganism."

"He's probably at that history club in town right now," said Sally—as though maybe they should all drive into the center to consult the priest on the etiquette of Paul's suggestion. She raised an eyebrow teasingly, but Elisabeth burst into tears. Richard's wife shook with sobs.

She whimpered. "I can't stand it much longer."

Richard hastened to comfort her with hugs.

"Can anyone? We pretend that life can be normal. At least in the evenings! Of course it isn't. What else can we do?"

"Evenings are for enjoyment," Sally said briskly. "They have to be, or else we'd go crazy. Don't go crazy on us, Liz. It'll be bad for the kids."

Paul grimaced. "We oughtn't to have watched that wretched program. What can those experts tell us?"

What indeed?

Newspapers appeared when the technology and appropriate buildings and delivery vans emerged. Radio began to broadcast as civilization advanced—followed by television stations and aerials and sets. . . . The media never offered any really new enlightenment. With minor variations, today was always the same ultimate day. Editorials and broadcasts spoke of the Flux, the Collapse of the Continuum. In spite of a definite pressure to conform to one's surroundings, the present day wasn't merely a repeat of the previous day. Else, how would anyone be aware of a succession of days? Aware, one certainly was.

Today Father Hopkins has delivered his snowdrop sermon. Tomorrow he was perfectly free to chose a different theme. For their part, radio and television might discuss a space-time anomaly, or the influence of a cosmic string from the dawn of the universe, or phenomonological anamnesis.

Tomorrow a riot might erupt in the medieval village or in the modern town. A rape or a murder might blemish the day. En route to the supermarket in the retail park a car crash might claim a life. If someone died,

they weren't restored to life the following day. If someone broke a leg, they wouldn't be walking around for a while.

Even so, one sensed that the day that followed the present day was not exactly a *tomorrow*. The next day, and the day after that, lacked futurity. The stream of time had encountered some barrier that forced chronology backward. Richard and Paul, and Elisabeth and Sally, and the kids too, were farm laborers in the mornings. In the afternoons they were workers in early industry in the local textile mill—till it was time for the kids to go to school, till it was time for Richard to become a local government officer in charge of planning applications, and for Paul to become a mortgage broker. Surprisingly, some people were still trying to move house—as if thus they might ease their medieval duties or finesse a finer hovel wherein to awaken in the mornings.

Evenings, as Sally had insisted, were for fun. Some people chose to view prospective new homes at bargain prices. A number of people made the effort to drive to the city thirty miles away, to return—or not, as the case might be—before the drowsiness began at around eleven o'clock.

That inevitable drowsiness! As the long day—the eight hundred year day—decayed, preliminary to the crumbling of the present, so did people begin to slumber, whether they wished to or not. Sleep softly; and wake hard.

If some scientist in a laboratory had contrived to remain conscious till past midnight, doped with amphetamines and surrounded by bright lights and bells and gongs, would he or she perhaps have experienced the onset of sheer *nothingness?* In the absence of futurity, what else could she or he possibly apprehend? Only nullity, vacancy, utter abeyance, absence of all context.

No news report spoke of any such attempt. In the absence of futurity, news could hardly electrify an audience. Events could never develop much forward momentum. Regional wars and politics had stalled. Also, stock exchange trading. Manufacturing continued. Goods produced during the industrial revolution regularly mutated into modern merchandise. Newsworthy disasters still occured. A flood in Bangladesh. A train crash in Japan. Oil tankers colliding in the Gulf.

Toward bedtime the night before, Richard had received a crank phone call. Some woman in town did not devote her evenings to leisure but to cold-calling at random to confide her own theory about the breakdown of time. According to the voice on the phone, the cycle of reincarnation had collapsed due to the increase in world population in the late twentieth century. The dead could only be reincarnated as *themselves* at an earlier stage in their own pre-existence. Everyone who experienced *the phenomenon* was actually dead. Didn't he realize this? The woman's logic had eluded Richard, so he had put the phone down.

Elisabeth soon stopped fretting. Richard glanced at his watch. A few

more blithe hours remained. Once Paul and Sally had departed homeward, and after the twins were in bed, perhaps he and his wife might make love.

What if Elisabeth became pregnant? Could a baby ever grow in her womb and be born after another two hundred and seventy recapitulative days? Would such a newcomer be born in a modern hospital or in a medieval hut?

Had *any* babies been born recently? Father Hopkins might know. Richard found within himself no desire to ask the priest. Nor, any longer, did he find desire itself.

From the kitchen he fetched a final chilled bottle of the dry Muscadet that the friends favored. Tomorrow evening, he must stop by the supermarket to restock.

"Here's to another day," he proposed.

"Do you remember ice-boxes?" Richard asked Beth in their home of mud and wattle as two candle stubs burned low. He freed the skirt of his tunic from his belt so as to hide the twice-darned tops of hose tied to his waist-band. "Do you remember moving pictures from far away in a box with a glass front? Do you remember voices from a box?"

His wife, in her ankle-length skirt and large apron, frowned in the flickery gloom. "Why we wasting the candles, Rich?"

Would she pull the cowl from her head and let down her braids while he could still behold her?

"Do you remember *machines?*" he persisted.

"Is this another of your visions?" she asked dolefully. "Maybe you ought to speak to the monk instead of to me."

"What were we doing this morning, Beth?"

Anxiety haunted her.

"Our tribe," she mumbled. "We was hiding from those soldiers of Rome. Your face was daubed with blue. Life's much better these days."

"That was at noontime, Beth. What were we doing earlier?"

Surely they had worn skins and chipped flints to fix to trimmed poles, around a fire in a cave mouth in the cold? Surely the shaman, who was now the monk, had imparted a vision of carts and hayricks?

"We ought to be abed, Rich!"

In the evening, as the light died, fire was finally tamed. The flash from the sky that had burned the pine tree re-awoke from embers to set piled branches ablaze and banish the hungry bear.

The shaman chanted about light being reborn with the dawn. What was that *dawn*—that those of the tribe could only recall in fleeting dreamlike spasms? Earlier in the day surely they had shared the life of some small hairy animal which was not their totem animal, the huge-

horned elk. They had surely themselves been beasts.

"Lis-ba!" Dik demanded of his wizened mate. "Wa Ma?"

He wanted to know where was their child of countless summers, now herself swollen with child. Dik's last few rotting teeth were aching. Soon he would be the oldest man around.

In the evening, the biped eventually achieved sentience. Its mind was confused by images of running on all fours.

As the moon arose the big-eyed lemur awoke. It gulped the warm sweet air. How clearly it could see compared with its disappearing dream of being underwater. The lemur climbed a branch, aspiring to the bleached light. It chattered to itself—"Dik, dik, dik!" Somehow it found the noise comforting.

A thought almost crystallized: an awareness of self. But oh the mesmerism of the moon. Self-consciousness submerged, as if tropic waters had risen to drown the forest. ●

S. N. Dyer

MORTAL CLAY

S. N. Dyer's high-spirited tale of the sixties captures the essence of the era and the capriciousness of fate.

Illustration by Steve Cavallo

This all begins, or maybe ends, with a *Wall Street Journal* that someone left in the coffeehouse.

It's over two decades now since the sixties ended (the sixties ended with the end of the Vietnam War, not on some obligatory year with a zero) and I'm still here in a seedy Pacific town serving cappuccino and avocado and sprout sandwiches.

We have a large voting block of dinosaurs, with hair that hasn't been cut or combed since the Nixon Administration, who ended up here like the elephant graveyard in some Tarzan flick. But we mostly have soulless yups with Beemers and portable phones who come here to melt their sunscreen in the salt-spray and have marginally safe sexual encounters with the dinosaurs' offspring. And these yups will pay ridiculous amounts for European tap water garnished with a nutritionally meaningless sprig of fruit. Which is why I now have a Beemer too. It's used, like me.

But I guess it really starts my freshman year at the university, one of those second rate Ivy Leaguers for the offspring of families so tied down by tradition that they'd lost the ability to go anywhere new. The university had a negative quota for Jews.

I got in, I guess, because I'd been state high school girls' fencing champion and fencing is such a goyisher thing to do that maybe it fooled them. Only their fencing instructor was this ex-Marine who wanted you to run five miles a day and stand in front of a ballet mirror balancing on one foot like the Karate Kid. Since I'd gone into fencing so I could pretend I was Maid Marion sticking it to Basil Rathbone, it just wasn't fun anymore. So fencing went the way of drinking milk, cutting my hair, and wearing bras. I guess I was sort of a proto-feminist, before feminism was even vaguely cool. Back then hip for girls was sleeping with guys who rebelled.

I was at freshman indoctrination when this kid walks over. He had a polyester narrow tie from Sears, and tortoiseshell glasses like he was Barry Goldwater's wimp doppelgänger. The weirdest thing about him was that he had a moptop Beatle cut—dark brown hair that hung to his eyebrows.

"What a creep," I'm thinking, and he sits down and says, "Do you know if there's an orthodox synagogue in town?"

I was kind of annoyed—I didn't think I looked so Jewish that he could pick me out across the room as the other quota kid. "No, I don't," I said. "Because I wouldn't be caught dead in a place where they'd make me sit in the balcony."

You would have thought outright rudeness might have given him a hint, but he was particularly dense in a genius sort of way, and we became friends. Judah Loew, king of grinds, emperor of geeks. He was a computer nerd before there were personal computers—slide rule in his belt holster, and always carrying a stack of punch cards to the university computing room. A man of Univac action.

And annoyingly protective. If I left the library or the laundromat at midnight, I'd find Judah there to walk me home. If I thought it would be neat to check out a biker store where they sold dope paraphernalia, I'd be the only one in the store accompanied by a straight A student.

There was nothing romantic about us. In fact, he was too much like a big brother, always checking out my boyfriends and telling me they were no good for me. He was right, of course. I dated these brainless society types, with familial yachting ties and familial weak chins, just because I liked to see the horror on their mothers' faces when they'd bring me home. I ran through those men pretty quickly, relying on my sultry ethnic charm to break their hearts. In turn, I was always getting my heart broken by draft resistance organizers or scuzzy hippie bass players or motorcycle bums—anyone who would drive *my* mother crazy.

I remember when my family came to visit at the end of freshman year and totally freaked out over my current boyfriend, a dropout chemistry major who'd dropped more acid than he'd sold. He would have been an extra if *Deliverance* had been about a canoe trip up the stream of consciousness.

Grandma especially had been horrified by the guy. Then Judah spoke to her in Yiddish, saying something that made her absolutely thrilled. "Come on, what'd you tell her?" I asked later.

He'd shrugged. "I said he was at yeshiva." So Grandma was convinced that my scuzzbucket bearded dope-smoking lover was an orthodox rabbinical student, and I was going to marry a *reb*.

So Judah had done me a partial favor; my parents were unable to badmouth my boyfriend because Grandma thought he was wonderful. And I had reason to believe Judah was performing similar helpful miracles for the few other Jewish coeds, not to mention dutifully attending synagogue on Friday nights, helping ancient women to their cars after, and accepting invitations home for dinner where eligible granddaughters coincidentally happened to be. But to my knowledge Judah never dated any of them.

All the Jewish guys I knew, even Judah with his interest in protecting helpless Jewish females (whether they wanted protection or not), actually did want to marry Jewish girls. As long as the Jewish girl was tall, blond, and a dead ringer for a *shicksa*.

Sophomore year Judah and I moved out of the dorm and into one of those communal houses, huge, old, and rundown. Not one of those communal houses where everyone ate vegetarian, or dealt grass, or plotted revolution (or all three at once), nothing so ordinary. No, we'd found a place where everyone was into wargames. It's weird, in retrospect, how we could have all been rabidly anti-war and yet have had no compunction against regularly killing half the population of Europe.

Any furniture in the house that wasn't Salvation Army or brick and board had been stolen from the dorm. I was the only girl living there,

which meant everyone initially expected me to do the cooking and cleaning, which meant that nothing got cooked or cleaned except on the rare occasions one of the guys managed to get a girlfriend. Then sooner or later she'd try to pick up the living room that was really a map of, say, Europe in 1815. Touching anything screwed up the game, and there'd be a screaming battle, and that would be the end of another girlfriend.

My boyfriends of course caused no such problems, except one who spilled marijuana all over the forest of Ardennes once, and another who passed out dead drunk for twelve hours in the middle of India, so we declared him a new uplift mountain range. Later he rolled over, making a tunnel possible, and Judah was able to sweep out through Pakistan and conquer Asia.

When I played wargames, I had this strategy of waiting until I got bored and then just plowing through the board raping, looting, and pillaging until my forces were wiped out. No one could believe I'd ever do anything that dumb again, which is why it always worked. Judah, though, understood, and would wait until I started looking sick of things, gather his resources, and sweep after me picking up the pieces. Thus it was my sacrifice that made it possible for Lithuania to single-handedly win World War I, and for Iceland to come out on top at Waterloo.

One day he and I were sitting in Eastern France—it was 1917, and I'd just blitzkrieged the trenches, finally ending a stalemate that had been going on for either three boring weeks or four bloody years, depending on your viewpoint. I had my shoes off and was picking up dead armies with my toes and trying to toss them into the active warzone near the TV. We were drinking beer. When I let my hair hang loose and wore lots of cleavage, I looked old enough to buy liquor, which is the main reason they'd let me room in this great cheap and strategically placed house.

"How come you got that Beatle haircut?" I asked. I was never tactful to begin with, and I was utterly fried by three Dos Equis. "Your mother get scared by a Three Stooges movie or something?"

"My mother," Judah said, "was shaved bald in Buchenwald."

"Hey, man, I'm sorry."

He shrugged, embarrassed, like it was ancient history but his parents just wouldn't let it go. "My father was in the ghetto in Prague. He got out and joined the Jewish partisans, except they spent most of the time getting attacked by the Polish partisans. Mom and Dad met in Israel after the War."

"So they moved here to get away from stuff?"

"Uh uh. They broke up. Dad's in the Israeli Army. Mom had some distant cousins in Miami. She remarried, then was in this carwreck. My stepfather and the kids don't like me much."

"You don't have family?" That may have been why he seemed so morbidly interested in mine.

He shook his head. "I was named for my father's father."

Which meant the old dude had to be long dead. We Jews don't have *Juniors*, don't name babies after living people. In theory it should lead to less confusion. In practice, it means every single kid in the whole extended family gets named after the same rich dead uncle.

I was so mellow on Mexican beer that I stood up, knocking over several fortifications. "I gotta go to the flicks. Wanna come?"

I was a film history major. In the sixties it was perfectly respectable to have a major like that, of no possible use to anyone. Plus, since everything we'd been told was bullshit, it stood to reason that the maligned and unimportant artforms were the ones we should be studying.

I'd gone to that university in the first place because I'd wanted to direct movies. They had a film department really into the auteur theory. Unfortunately, I'd learned that the only role for women in film-making was in front of the camera, or in front of a typewriter, or supine on a couch.

The only important woman film-maker, you see, the only one worthy of being considered an auteur, had been Leni Riefenstahl. And she'd been a Nazi propagandist.

So I switched to criticism, specializing in silent film. There was certainly a crying need for that.

Anyway, being a film major meant watching movies three evenings a week, taking notes like "Jump cut to empty bottle, significant," and "mise en scene verified by angle shot of graveyard," but since I was scribbling in the dark I'd find everything written over everything else so the notes were useless.

Afterward, you had to go to the coffee shop with the other five people in the class who were real film majors (instead of just filling their humanity requirement with a real mick), where you had to one up the others by talking about those jump cuts and wipes, and sip foreign coffee until you were wired beyond sleep.

The only film major I vaguely tolerated was named Elbert. His forebears had enough money to keep him from having to work but not enough to let him have real fun. He was a conspiracy theorist. His current theory was that our generation's disillusion involved discovering that Dad on *Fury* was working for the CIA. It meant that he was always talking about *Mission: Impossible* or Peter Graves-fights-giant-insects-movies, which can wear on you after a while. I personally date my own discouragement from learning that they had lied to me in school, that Canada had actually won the War of 1812.

We showed up at the auditorium, bought tickets—twenty-five cents—and Elbert sat on my other side scowling because he thought Judah was my date. Judah scowled too, because he could see Elbert liked me, and Elbert was so bland and respectable that the only thing he had remotely resembling a fault was that he wasn't Jewish. If you're bent on protect-

ing someone, it's a downer if they're threatened by an ant instead of a crocodile.

I was in a proseminar on art films. We watched *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, which is wonky good fun except that I was busy taking notes about the use of diagonals. Diagonals were the hallmark of German expressionist silent cinema, and I was planning to write my term paper on the 1931 *Frankenstein*, which was derivative of German Expressionism. Mostly because finding art in Boris Karloff seemed like a really obnoxious thing for me to try to prove.

The second feature was Paul Wegener's *The Golem*. We'd just got to the bit where the medieval rabbi, Judah Loew, is making a clay man to protect the Jews of the ghetto, and animating him by writing a holy word on his forehead, when I thought I'd be funny.

"Hey Jude," I said, digging my elbow into his side. "Is that the grandfather you were named after?"

He looked at me—I could see his stupid moptop hair and deep-set eyes below, flickering in the light of the movie, then he got up and left.

I ran out and looked, but he was gone. So I watched the rest of the movie and did cappuccino 'til the wee hours with Elbert, who insisted on walking me home and then fell asleep on the couch (which was currently the Russian front—the end table was Leningrad).

I went up to Judah's room. His light was off, and he came to his door rubbing his eyes. "Look, I'm sorry, man," I said. I figured his grandfather must have been in a concentration camp too, or something else gross.

His hair was all mussed up from sleep, and it looked like he had a birthmark on his forehead. I just couldn't resist. "Hey, is that a holy word?"

He scowled, and slammed the door in my face. I stood for about thirty seconds, thinking how I really needed a shut-off valve between my brain and my mouth, then went to bed.

The next day Nixon invaded Cambodia.

Vietnam was bad enough, but now this. The whole school went on strike immediately. We were all antiwar, except for three young Republicans whom we considered the ultimate non-conformists, and almost respected. The professors canceled classes and went on strike with us, or at least most of them, so I could stop thinking about my frame-by-frame analysis of *Frankenstein*.

Things were pretty peaceful at first—Kent State was a while away—and then our leaders (my ex-boyfriends) decided we ought to go lie down in front of the draft bus. This particular draft bus was going to be full of farmboys who were not all that unhappy to be leaving the farm and going to do their patriotic duty in a stupid war they didn't understand. They were, at least, leaving the farm.

I came down that morning and found everyone too excited to refight

Trafalgar. (We'd had a leaky pipe, and were making the best of it.) We were all in our most casual clothes, tight-fitting so the cops couldn't grab you, with Keds for running our fastest and jumping our highest.

Elbert had come over; he'd actually been reading handouts from strike headquarters, and was wrapped in Saran Wrap and greased up with Vaseline to keep out tear gas, and had an army surplus helmet. I was embarrassed to be on the same planet with him.

"Stick near me, I'll protect you," he said. Judah said, "No, don't get out of my eyesight."

It was kind of touching, the two biggest geeks in town concerned about my welfare.

We headed to the gathering spot. Half the university had promised to come, but when push came to shove, only about three hundred of us were dumb enough or sober enough to get up at four A.M. and confront the cops.

We got to the draft board, and found the place empty. The city was kind of surreal at dawn, almost pretty. Someone found out that the buses had been scheduled to leave from a parking lot about a half-mile away, to avoid us. So we ran. We were so hyped on adrenaline by then—how dare they not allow us to lie down in traffic and get our heads beaten in—that we made it in record time. Three hundred running students in black armbands. Elbert sounded like an asthma attack waiting to happen.

We skidded to a halt. There were the buses and the draftees. And there were a whole bunch of cops. Rows and rows of them, in nazi-like regalia, all dark and with weird helmets, and no faces. All holding eighteen inch nightsticks. The tactical police squads of three counties. Quiet, menacing, alien zombies.

All we wanted to do was stop war, injustice, the draft, death. And maybe have a little fun in the process.

Everything blends in here. When you see a movie, things seem so clear. But whoever started whatever, it was up front and I was near the back. When all the shouting and yelling started we surged forward. It was like, when fifty years from then your grandchildren asked whether you helped stop the war, you wanted to be able to show a scar. So we went up, shouting "Hey hey, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?" and "Ho Ho Ho Chi Minh, NLF is gonna win!" and "Pigs off campus!" even though we weren't anywhere near the university. It was the only anti-cop slogan we had.

Then suddenly I was at the front, and there were kids running with blood everywhere, or so it seemed, and cops chasing them waving clubs, and people down on the pavement with cops kicking them, and other students as close as they could get, yelling slogans and swear words until someone chased them. Or that was my impression, but I was getting only bits and pieces. I was more wired on epinephrine than on any twelve cappuccinos.

I stood there, looking around, trying to figure out what to do. The kids in the bus were looking out the windows and cheering on the cops! What a pisser. I'd got separated from my friends. I was all alone in a melee.

Which was when a cop established eye contact with me, something I guess you shouldn't do because then he came at me.

There was a broken sign by my feet—one of those clenched fists—and I picked up the stick and parried his blow. It was kind of weird, more like saber than foils, big slashes, but I managed to keep him off. In fact, I was kind of enjoying it, now that things were going my way. I even quoted *Robin Hood*, which was my favorite movie (even though I told all my friends I liked *Citizen Kane* or something by Kurosawa or Bergman. Much cooler).

" 'You speak treason,' " I said, then was Errol Flynn. " 'Fluently.' "

Our little sortie was annoying the Tac Squad and getting a bit of an audience. A couple more cops came in to help. I lost my stick, got hit so my whole right arm went numb, and was looking at a nightclub with my skull in its trajectory when someone shoved me out of the way and took my place.

Judah.

He went down with a crunch, and then Elbert was there, actually picking him up in the fireman's carry they taught in first-aid class, and shouting for me to follow him. We took off, trusting everyone else would stop the draft bus, and headed for the periphery yelling for a medic. We ducked behind some cars, and Elbert dropped Judah and collapsed himself.

There wasn't any blood anywhere, but Judah was out like a light. In fact, he didn't seem to be breathing, and I couldn't find a pulse, not that I was all that sure how to find one, especially with my left hand.

His moptop haircut was disarranged, and I could see that what I'd thought was a birthmark was actually, well, clay squiggles.

"What the. . . ?" said Elbert.

"I think it's Hebrew," I told him. Only the letters were all smudged and the clay coming off. "Man, he's the Golem!"

"Wow," said Elbert, and his eyes met mine with agreement. Elbert was, after all, a guy who believed the CIA killed Kennedy and the Air Force had UFO aliens in Arizona and the Bermuda Triangle was the gateway to another dimension, so my best friend being a medieval clay man wasn't much of a stretch for him.

It made sense, sort of. Judah's name. His father in the Prague ghetto, then in Israel. "A rigid kind of guy," Judah had called him. His need to protect me, the nearest Jew in constant trouble.

"Not really the Golem," I concluded. "The Golem's son."

It occurred to me that if I could remake the word, he would live. Only I didn't know Hebrew. I did go to religious school when I was young, but I

had this weird teacher who only liked to talk about Jews who fought in the American Civil War, and I'd been mad because I was missing Saturday morning cartoons. I'd wanted to learn Hebrew, because the fourth grade kids had a Hebrew textbook called *Rocket to Mars,* but I dropped out long before that.

Face it, the limit of my knowledge of my heritage was some Yiddish insults.

But I figured, maybe some other symbol of power would do. And I scraped off the bits of clay, rolled them between my left hand and my thigh, and began to make a peace sign. You know, the Mercedes logo with an extra line.

I wasn't quite done when the cops burst into our part of the parking lot.

"Quick," said Elbert. "We gotta split."

And then Judah's eyes popped open, the Tac Squad arrived swinging, and Judah took off like a rabbit.

We, on the other hand, got beat up and tossed in a paddy wagon. But it wasn't too bad, just the end of my college career. Elbert and I moved to California and grew together and grew apart and did other stuff, and I translated my taste for too much caffeine into a business.

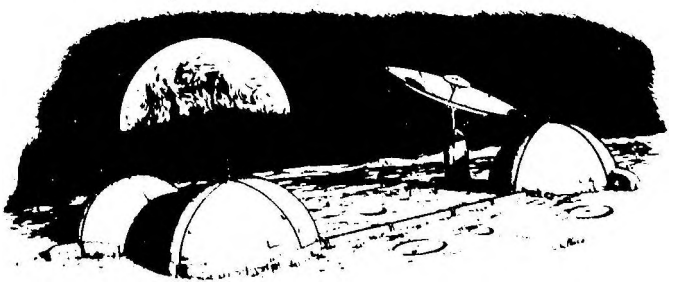
And now we're back to where we started, with some soulless yup leaving a copy of the *Wall Street Journal* in my café.

And there on the front page is a picture of a middle-aged CEO who's running a mega-billion dollar company, and everyone knows he's screwing up the environment and messing with Third World politics to keep repressive regimes favorable to his company in power, and doing every other greedy, heartless, conscienceless thing that an executive who believes only in money can do.

And the guy has a Beatles haircut, and a familiar name.

So I know what I have to do. I have to find someone to watch the coffeehouse while I'm gone, and feed the dogs and water the garden, and I have to buy some presentable clothes, and a plane ticket, and some shoes. And after that, I have to go to New York, get into corporate headquarters, and somehow change the luxury car logo on Judah's forehead into what I'd intended in the first place.

I hope I can remember where I left the extra clay. ●



Kathleen Ann Goonan

ADVANCE NOTICE

The Bones of Time, a novel based on Kathleen Ann Goonan's September 1993 *Asimov's* novella "Kamehameha's Bones," is just out from Tor Books. Ms. Goonan's first novel, *Queen City Jazz* (Tor), was a New York *Times* Notable Book for 1994. Her next novel, *Mississippi Blues,* will be a sequel to that earlier book.

Illustration by Ron Chironna

"I still don't understand why your clonegroup is so crazy about Earth, much less Bangkok," said Brian. He shoved his plate aside. "This isn't food. It's revolting. Little headless fish. Noodles. And I can't even tell what's in that bowl. Why did we have to eat outside? Everything is covered with flies."

Alex shrugged. She loved the sting of hot peppers on her tongue, savored the texture of the noodles. Ancient food. Her chopsticks flashed in the hot sun. "I told you you wouldn't like it. It's really different from Mars. That's its charm. It hasn't changed in a hundred years. Not since 2050."

"Alex, don't you realize they've been having riots here *because* of that? This isn't exactly a good time to be a tourist. These people *know* there's something better. They'd all move to Kronos if they could."

As Alex listened to her husband drone on, she began to get a headache. Her clothes were soaked with sweat. The sun was unfiltered by a dome, and it hurt her eyes even through the powerful visor which she and just about everyone else wore. The street was full of exhaust fumes, teeming with Thais vying for newbaht. "I wish they'd bring me my gin sour," she said.

"Maybe that's not what you really ordered," Brian said. "You had to show off and try doing it in Thai. You don't seem to remember much of the language for having spent three years here."

"That was fifteen years ago," she said. "It's coming back. See? I was right." The small, dark waitress, wearing an orange sari, took a gin sour from a tray and set it before her with a flourish.

"Can't we go somewhere and get some real food?" asked Brian.

Alex realized she was no longer hungry, and put down her chopsticks. "Why did you come?" she asked. "I'd really like to know. Tienn's still pretty interesting to you, isn't she? Even after five years." It must be the transit drugs, she thought, almost as soon as she said it. They haven't worn off. And the heat. She was remembering now. It took almost a week to adjust to the temperature. You just had to keep drinking.

Brian grabbed the little table and pushed back his chair. Alex held her drink to keep it from spilling.

"I give up," Brian said. "You're on your own. If you want to meet me later, I'll be at that temple on the hill—what's it's name?—this evening. Have a great time, Alex. And be careful. Despite your silly devil-may-care attitude, it's dangerous here. Apparently three tourists disappeared just last week. And there's a curfew in effect. But I guess you can take care of yourself, miss big shot Famous Artist."

She watched him stalk off into the crowd on the sidewalk and wondered why she didn't care. In fact, she felt a bit relieved. She couldn't put up with his complaints all day. She hadn't come here to play tourguide. She wanted to find her clone, Tienn. And not, particularly, for a pleasant

reunion. She became angry all over again with Tienn as she drank her gin sour.

She sensed that someone was staring at her; she turned, glanced briefly at the next table, and saw that a group of soldiers sat there. The place was crawling with them, with their dark visors, large-brimmed hats, khaki shorts, and stunners. One of them rose and went into the hotel. Alex turned back to her table.

There had been tourist warnings about Bangkok even when they left Kronos six months ago, but there had been no actual ban on travel. Something about a local revolt, she remembered now: a minor skirmish, downplayed by her travel agent.

Brian hadn't wanted her to come, but she'd insisted. "That's the way you are," he had complained. "Stupid and stubborn. I guess that's just part of the artist clonegroup temperament. Right?"

Alex fervently wished Brian had decided to stay home. Then his carping voice would be six months away. She was about ready for another drink.

"Offworlder." She looked up, startled. Was it so obvious?

The man who stood in front of her was almost as tall as she. His white shirt was soaked here and there with sweat. He wore long dark cotton slacks, brown sandals, and a hat that read *Singha Beer*.

He smiled; she couldn't see the expression in his eyes because of his visor.

"My name is Suraphong. Like to see the city? Seventh Temple, Rivermarket, Palace. I can take you all day for only fifty newbaht."

She might as well spend a day getting oriented before trying to find Tienn, who hadn't answered any messages in years. Alex didn't even know where she lived.

"Twenty," she replied automatically.

"I will starve," he said, "and my children will starve."

"You have no children," she said.

He smiled. "How did you know? My mother, then."

They settled on thirty, and she climbed into the three-wheeled tuk-tuk that added its exhaust to the haze that hung over the city. She remembered the clamor, fifteen years ago, for more healthy forms of transport. After all, there were electric cars in 2050. But not in Bangkok: therefore, they were not allowed.

Suraphong kept looking at her in the mirror questioningly, seemed about to speak, stopped, cleared his throat.

"What is your name, Miss?"

"Alex," she said.

His mouth in the convex mirror was exaggeratedly large; she saw it tighten with some unknown emotion. "Perhaps you would like to see the holomarket first?"

She didn't wonder why he asked; the holomarket was a popular tourist destination. She'd had her share of student works for sale there during her study years.

They crawled through streets teeming with people; passed open shops full of military gear, odd, ancient metal weapons, old-fashioned handguns that, if she could afford the duty, would be worth a fortune on Mars as antiques. The only thing different now was the soldiers scattered here and there. Something about the rebellion, she supposed.

At a light, he said, "Some soldiers have been following us, Miss, ever since the Royal Hotel. Do you know why?"

"There's no reason for them to follow me," she said, starting to turn around. "It's probably your imagination."

"I don't think so," he said. "I must tell you, you really should not be out in public like this. But I will lose them. No problem."

"Why shouldn't I be out in public?" she asked, but her question was drowned by the rapid acceleration of the tuk-tuk. Suraphong pulled onto the right side of the road and began weaving in and out of oncoming traffic. He then took a rapid turn across all four lanes, entered a tiny alley, and dropped down to a dirt path next to one of the klongs that laced Bangkok. They sped along the canal of green, slow-moving water for a mile before halting beneath a bridge.

Alex opened her door and jumped out. She was sprinting up the embankment when Suraphong called, "Tienn! I know who you are!"

She turned, astonished. "Tienn?" Even in Kronos, where three of her clones lived, she rarely ran into anyone who mistook her for one of them.

He stepped from the tuk-tuk. "I will serve you in any way I can. I am highly honored to meet you. But why did you sit there in plain view of the soldiers? You are lucky they did not kill you."

"Kill?" asked Alex, feeling very disoriented. She backed up another step.

"For inciting that riot a few months ago. Your speech was truly an inspiration to all of us who detest the Law of 2050. Remember? 'It is our duty to overthrow any law that causes death, pain, and suffering.' How important that was to me. Two of my sisters died of diseases that could easily have been healed were we allowed to use the medical knowledge available on Mars."

Alex sat down on the embankment. Her legs were shaking. She began speaking in Thai, to make herself absolutely clear.

"I'm not Tienn. We're from the same clonegroup. I'm just an artist—one of those oppressors from Mars, I guess. I've never really thought about it." She watched a woman in a wide-brimmed straw hat paddle by on the klong, her boat full of baskets of yellow and red peppers, and took off her visor to wipe sweat from her forehead. "I was here fifteen years ago, for study. I lived near Wat Po for two years."

Suraphong laughed. "That explains the very bad Thai, Madam," he said, flashing teeth stained by cigarettes. "Don't try it. As you can see, my Kronese is quite adequate. I've heard that Tienn is an artist too," he said. "But she has been wanted since the last demonstration."

"I don't understand what the problem is."

"Of course not," he said lightly, but she heard him add under his breath, "Greedy offworlder."

The man's tone of voice made Alex uncomfortable, then angry. Why should she let this Thai native-of-Earth make her feel ashamed? She supposed she had been more insulated during her study years than she realized. Or, perhaps, just absorbed. Head-in-the-clouds, like Brian said.

"I suppose it's a wonder that your clone could understand what it's like to be trapped in the year 2050 for tourists from Mars, as if we were creatures in the zoo," he continued.

"But it's not just for tourists. And only parts of Earth," said Alex, wondering as she spoke why she automatically defended the law. "There are other reasons."

"Does it matter what happens elsewhere on Earth?" Suraphong asked. "We live *here,* from birth to death. *Nothing* in the vectors is allowed to change. Nothing. Oh, there are endless scholarly discourses about it, learned arguments. Preserving the culture for the future. Which is you." Suraphong spat on the ground. "If you weren't Tienn's clone, I would hate you, as I hate all tourists. But since you are, perhaps there is hope for you. Perhaps you can understand, as she does, and help."

She thought it was best to let him think that she might. "I'm sorry about your sisters," she said, as she tried to decide what to do next. Maybe Brian was right. Certainly, she shouldn't be out and about. But the anger that had driven her so far was every bit as strong as it had been before. She had to find Tienn. Now she wished she'd given more thought about how to do it. The pieces that showed up in the galleries on Mars were untraceable, sent by an agent who never responded to Alex's attempts to communicate.

She was startled by Suraphong's sudden grip on her arm. "Soldiers," he said. "Get in." He pushed her into the tuk-tuk, leapt in, and wrung a burst of speed from the tiny engine that amazed Alex. She looked back, but they had just gone around a turn and she couldn't see any soldiers.

"Don't worry, Miss Alex," he said, and laughed. As he turned to face her, the wind plastered his black hair against his head. "They will never catch me. I know every alley in Bangkok. It's the holo market, eh?"

"Maybe I should just go back to the hotel," she said.

"No, what for? Since you are not Tienn, it is all right. You are an artist, you have come very far to see art, to see what is happening, no?"

"But you said killed—"

"I am sorry that I disturbed you," he said. "They would try to take her

without killing, I think. That way they could find out the names of members of the underground."

Alex knew she ought to insist on returning to the hotel.

But now she wanted to find Tienn more than ever. Her clone was here, in Bangkok. Somewhere. But what had happened to her? Alex felt extremely disoriented. Everything was skewed. Transit drugs, she told herself. Transit drugs. It will be all right. She wiped sweat off her face and wished she had a cold drink. They passed a billboard of a lovely little cottage. A blonde woman wearing fine clothing held the hand of a fat, healthy child. Beneath it, on a sidewalk littered with garbage, a thin, black-haired Thai woman crouched, holding a bowl out in front of her.

Suraphong turned down a back street lined with ragged mats that defined living spaces. People were cooking over small braziers and children played naked along the klong. Cardboard and tin hovels alternated with open sewers. Alex turned away and looked at the klong instead. Long-tail boats skimmed past, leaving clouds of exhaust in their wake.

The river life—how well she remembered it now. Waking just before dawn to insistent, swelling bird song—there must have been millions of them. The birds were saved by the Law of 2050 too, she thought defiantly.

Each morning she sat on the steps that led down to her boat, sipping hot sweet coffee before stepping into her own narrow, long boat, untethering it, and pushing off with her paddle to go to the University. She'd had some fool idea of connecting, she remembered, as if a clone could connect with anything other than her own damned reflection. She thought it was great they no longer raised clonegroups together. She had hated being among five others like herself, just at different ages. Alex still didn't understand the logic behind cloning creativity. But she knew that she'd returned to Mars with something special. She'd broken from them all—except from Tienn.

She knew the perfect holocopies of her work that kept turning up in Kronos were Tienn's. They had to be. She didn't know why Tienn wanted to be so mysterious. When "Black Ellipsoid With Gold," with its tiny, glowing gold sphere that constantly moved among the complex planes of the work was reviewed as the new work of the "Unknown Genius From Bangkok," Alex destroyed the laserdrive program she'd worked on for a year in a fit of anger. Her holo wasn't exactly the same. Of course not. It was just so similar that the novelty was gone the instant Tienn's hit. And novelty was everything in her field. She didn't blame Tienn. After all, Brian had been about to marry Tienn before he'd met her. But after living with him for five years, she was sure she'd gotten the worst of that deal.

Suraphong stopped, and Alex recognized the temple that marked the edge of the holo district. In spite of her anxiety, Alex began to get excited.

Suraphong turned to speak. Alex wished he would take off his visor so she could see his eyes. Something about him bothered her, though she couldn't quite decide what it was. Just nervousness, she supposed. After all, he'd kept the soldiers from arresting her, or whatever they wanted to do.

"I hear there are nice things on Pyatai Road," he said. "Some studios with special work. Maybe even something of Tienn's."

She got out. Next to her several street vendors, sitting cross-legged on the pavement, displayed simple, predictable holos. A three-inch-high woman whirled through stylized steps, her glittering headdress bobbing. Two men performed a mock battle, swords flashing. One dance might cost a hundred newbaht; an evening's entertainment, a million. Most of these artists rented programming time, then duplicated their work endlessly. But even a copy was very expensive, here. But that was part of their primitive charm.

"I will wait here," said Suraphong. He removed his Singha Beer hat. "Here," he said. "This will help cover your face. And even if someone thought you were Tienn, she is a great hero in the streets. An Offworlder who dared to speak against her own people." The headband, wet with Suraphong's sweat, was a brief, cool band across her forehead.

At first, Alex walked without plan. Tienn, a rebel—so hard to believe. Alex wondered. Tienn was older; she had always been first. First with each goddamned idea. Alex couldn't imagine, though, becoming as political as Tienn had apparently become. And who was this Suraphong, anyway? She decided to hire another tuk-tuk on the other side of the market.

She bought a coconut from a vendor; he neatly lopped off the top with a machete and gave it to her with a straw. It tasted sweet; it was cold.

The fronts of the shops were open, but the interiors were dark. Each holo was highlighted in a projection booth, and Alex relaxed in spite of herself, enjoying the newness of the work here, despite its archaic nature. The use of color, for one thing, was different. If nothing else, this trip would give her new ideas, rejuvenate her inner artistic workings. She became lost in the holos.

In the back aisles of the fifth shop, she stopped, taken aback by the work she saw.

It was a woman sitting on wooden steps that descended into a slow-moving, deep green klong.

The time was dawn. The sky was faintly colored with streaks of pink; straight above, the blue was deepening.

The attendant startled her by touching her shoulder. "You like this? You would see better if you removed your visor."

Alex left the visor on and pulled it down lower.

"I like it," she said.

She more than liked it. It was her—or Tienn. Their face, their hair.

"This one has sound," the small, thin attendant said. "This artist start-

ed it—now everyone wants sound! But hers is the best. She has the expertise. Listen!"

Alex did not resist as the woman attached the tiny transmitter to her ear.

The bird calls she heard intensified with the light. Alex could almost taste the hot, sweet coffee as the tiny figure slowly sipped.

A little *saw* was at her side, an instrument like a tiny fiddle. The woman picked it up and tentatively played a few notes. But before the notes gathered into a song, she put it back down; the sound of the woods touching was gentle and hollow.

Then she rose, stepped down into the tethered boat, knelt, and untied it. When she dipped the long paddle into the klong, Alex heard the splash, the hush of the uptake. Then it vanished.

"Again?" asked the clerk.

"I'll buy it," she said. And sell it in Kronos for ten times as much. Why not?

"Mars," the clerk observed, as she took the credit chip. She input it, and Alex saw with amusement that she was impressed at the amount available. Alex was rich; it only took a few large sales each year. But she wouldn't be for long if Tienn kept scooping her.

The tiny woman glanced at Alex with a measuring look. Finally she said, "If you like this artist, I have something else by her. Special. For people like you," she said in a disarming, yet enticing tone of voice.

Translation, thought Alex: for tourists with credit to throw around

"It's very expensive, though," she added. "Would you like to see it?"

Alex nodded.

The clerk input a long code, shielding the screen with her body to make sure Alex didn't see it. She took out the little box that held the chip. "Follow me," she said, looking over her shoulder. Alex was becoming puzzled.

They went into a little room in the back, and the woman motioned toward the viewbooth.

In a rapid succession of scenes, Alex saw a little girl born, under a bridge next to a filthy canal. She was raped twice before she was ten, earned money by sweeping streets, had two children, and died of starvation herself while trying to feed them. Two other lives—the life of a man and another woman—passed before Alex could tear herself away. She switched off the machine, and found she was crying. She had been drawn into the pain and suffering of those lives with swift intensity. Here was no cerebral mindplay. No "Black Ellipsoid With Gold." This was reality.

The clerk was looking at her anxiously. Alex took a deep breath, and said, "How many are there like this?"

"This is my only one," she said. "I hear that she may be making more. It is difficult to find out. If you like, perhaps I can get another. But it will take a few days."

"Where does this artist live?"

"No one knows," said the woman.

"I need to know before I will buy it."

"That is not at all possible, Offworlder," said the woman, who stepped back. "And this piece is seventy thousand newbaht cash."

Alex was astounded. Half her year's income! She became angry once again. It might only have been a quarter of her year's income if it weren't for Tienn.

"It is illegal to have that much cash," Alex said. "The credit changers can give only five thousand at a time." To simulate the 2050 economy, she recalled.

The woman laughed. "Everyone knows an Offworlder can do as they please. I am not a fool. You have cash."

"Not that much," said Alex.

The woman shook her head silently. Alex wondered why she looked frightened. "Seventy," she insisted.

"I *must* know where the artist lives," said Alex. "It is very important."

"Perhaps this is not for you," said the woman, and began to put it away, looking out at the street as she did so. "You do not understand it."

Alex surprised herself by paying. She hid the tiny chip in the skinflap she'd had installed in a special shop in Kronos. It was very convenient for carrying chips. She put the boat, bought legally, in her wallet.

"Tell no one where you got this," the woman said.

Alex was tense as she stepped into the hot sun.

She saw the soldier an instant before he grabbed at her, spun rapidly, and kicked the stunner from his hand. But she was much too rusty to counter two attackers at once. They knocked her hat and visor to the ground, looked at her once, laughed and nodded, and dragged her down the street.

"I'm not Tienn," she said, trying to catch her breath. "I'm her clone!" She saw Suraphong at the end of the street, lounging against his tuk-tuk with a newspaper. "Ask him," she said, pointing. "He knows who I am."

"Shut up," said one and shoved her into the back of a police car.

As they pulled into traffic, she looked out the back and saw that Suraphong was following them. She was startled—and curious.

The police station was shabby and crowded. For a moment Alex thought she would faint, she was so hot. She was roughly but ineffectively searched—for weapons, she thought, since nothing was taken—then thrust into a windowless room.

Soon a man in a suit came in. He tossed his cigarette on the floor and ground it out. "So," he said. "Now we have you."

Alex stood up and opened her mouth, and he pushed her back into her chair. "I demand my lawyer," she said.

"Fine. You are wanted for treason, murder—who knows what all.

Good. You need a lawyer."

"What are you talking about? I just got here from Kronos."

"That is a joke."

"No, look," she said. She pulled out her passport chip. "Play it," she said. "Who do you think I am, anyway?"

"Tienn Dangude," he said.

"And she's committed these crimes? I don't believe it," said Alex.

"It is a serious crime against the state to incite riots that lead to deaths. You should have thought about it before behaving so recklessly."

While he played her chip, Alex turned the morning over in her mind. What was going on? How could she find Tienn now? Bangkok was enormous. It could take months. And, she finally admitted to herself, it might be dangerous.

"You must excuse me," said the man, startling her. "I apologize, Madam. You are her clone. We had no idea she had one. What are you doing in Bangkok?" She noticed instantly the new tone of respect in his voice; that was the way she was used to being treated. What a contrast, she realized, to how others were handled by officials.

"I was here during my student days," she said. "I have simply come to see Bangkok again. You have no idea how far ahead I had to plan to avoid the rainy season."

He laughed, and returned her chip with a slight bow. "I are sorry for the inconvenience. I won't subject you to a cellcheck—you are clearly who you say you are. I myself am from Mars, but I have been in this hellhole longer than I would like to say. These miserable people—worse than animals, the way they live. I will put a special clearance on for you; you will not be harassed again. We are honored to have such a highly esteemed artist here, and hope you will return."

With all of your high-value Mars credits, she heard; with our shared oppressorship.

Beggars accosted her when she left the police station; she absently scattered some newbaht among them, and ignored the taxi drivers who yelled, "Madam. Taxi? Cheap."

She was two blocks down the steaming street when Suraphong pulled up next to her. "Jump in," he said. "I have found where Tienn is staying."

Alex didn't move.

"How?" she asked.

He smiled. "I have many friends in the underground."

Alex found it difficult to breathe.

"Just tell me," she said. "I'll pay you."

"You don't trust me?" he said. He held up his hands. "What have I done? I'm sorry that I was wrong about the holomarket being safe. Truly, I thought it was."

"It wasn't," she said shortly.

"There is no address to this place where she is living. It is very complicated. Look, you are safe, no? The police know who you are now? Of course. They wouldn't have let you go if they thought you were Tienn."

"That's true," she admitted.

If it were just the gallery work, she realized, she might make Brian happy by booking the next transport home. It was all getting very complex.

But the holo of the people of Bangkok had burned into her mind.

She got in.

It was not far, and she fended off Suraphong's questions about how she liked the holos she'd seen, and if she'd bought any. After cautiously venturing down streets just wide enough for the tuk-tuk, he pulled up to a high brick wall with an iron gate set in it.

"This is where we must be careful," he said, "and hope that she is home to give you safe entry. I have heard that she has killed police officers. She is wily and brave, this Tienn."

Embedded in the brick wall was a primitive screen. Alex activated it, and in a second a forbidding face flashed onto it. The man looked at her, then looked at her some more.

"I'm Tienn's clone," she said. "Alex. Tell her Alex is here to see her."

The screen darkened, and she waited nervously for a minute.

Then Tienn appeared.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded.

"You don't seem very glad to see me."

"The last time I saw you was right after Brian decided to marry you instead of me. But that was years ago, my dear." Alex saw her shrug. "I no longer care. What do you want?"

"I need to talk to you about—art."

Tienn's laughter crackled on the cheap speaker. "Of course. Art. I suppose I should regard it as a welcome relief." Her tone of voice changed. "How did you find me?"

"My tuk-tuk driver knows someone in the underground," Alex said.

"Let me see him," said Tienn.

Alex turned. "He's gone," she said.

"Good," said Tienn.

Alex was surprised when a young, shy girl came to the gate, rather than a soldier.

She led Alex through a maze of bricked walkways, which were shaded by tall trees. Tropical birds darted through the air and Alex heard the splash of a fountain somewhere. Of course, Tienn could afford such luxury! Alex began feeling bitter again.

She was left in a room that was only a roof and a tile floor punctuated by cushions and low tables. Beyond the thick, intricately carved wood columns that supported the roof was a formal garden. In the hot, bright

sun, the colors of it contrasted brightly with the cool, dark room in which she stood. Why had she left Bangkok, she wondered? The impact of feeling at home here was unmistakable.

The little instrument in the holo, a *saw,* was next to one of the cushions. Alex picked it up.

It felt familiar in her hands. Although she had studied the instrument for only two years, she had become quite adept at playing it. She began to pick out a traditional tune when she stopped, hearing the sound of bare feet on stone behind her. "Keep playing," said Tienn.

Alex turned. "You look so strange," she said.

Tienn was dressed in black trousers and a black shirt. She wore a black beret. Her face was smudged with dirt; she looked tired. She pushed the stunner she carried under her belt.

Alex put down the *saw.* "I don't remember how to play very well," she said.

"I've become very good," said Tienn. She picked it up and plucked out a quick, intense tune. To Alex, it sounded full of keening voices, and the pain of Tienn's new work.

Tienn set the saw down carefully and dropped onto a cushion. She had an odd, fierce expression, one that Alex had never seen in the mirror. "What's going on?" Alex asked. "Why do you have that stunner?"

"Brian," said Tienn, ignoring her question. "How is he?"

Alex shrugged. "He seems to be rather disenchanted with me," she said.

"I'm sorry," said Tienn. "I could have told you that would happen. After all, it happened with me. Did he come with you?" she asked, rather eagerly, Alex thought.

"Yes," said Alex.

Tienn looked pleased. "Very good," she murmured. "Very good. What are you doing here? It's a hell of a long way from Mars, my dear."

It seemed so trivial now. "I came because of 'Black Ellipsoid With Gold.'"

"Ah." Tienn nodded. "You liked it then? That was quite a long time ago. It seems like another life to me."

Alex felt her anger returning. "Not only did I like it—I did it! But before mine was finished, yours appeared in the gallery. I couldn't sell mine."

Tienn laughed. "That's very odd, Twig. As very much alike as that? What a shame."

It had always made Alex angry when Tienn called her Twig. It seemed demeaning. "A shame? It's happened so many times. You're doing it on purpose."

"Why would I do that? I didn't even know it was happening."

Alex could tell Tienn was beginning to be a bit perturbed, and pressed her advantage. "I don't believe it," she said.

"What do I care?" asked Tienn.

"That's right—what did you ever care? You were always so perfect."

"Was I?" Tienn laughed again, but Alex heard the pain in her voice. "Brian didn't seem to think so."

Alex didn't say anything.

"But what does it matter now?" Tienn continued. "What? Alex, the money I got went for a good cause. Better than you moving to a new salon in Kronos."

"You didn't know what I was working on?"

"How could I?" asked Tienn. "That's ridiculous. Do you think I employed spies?"

Alex remembered that Brian had said the same thing.

"What about this one?" she asked, feeling her self-control slipping away again as she removed her latest work-in-progress from her wallet. She wasn't sure if she believed Tienn or not. The last time she'd seen her, Tienn had refused to speak to her.

She stalked over to Tienn's projector, which was absolutely state-of-the-art.

"May I?" Alex asked. Tienn nodded.

The work was three-quarters finished, but the idea was firm. "Recognize it?" asked Alex. "When will I see *this* in Kronos? Or perhaps it's already there?"

Tienn said nothing, but rose and pushed a button on the projector.

Alex's work flickered, vanished, and was replaced by its completed version.

"You are right," said Tienn. She looked at Alex very directly. "It is on its way. But I had no idea that you were doing the same thing. Alex, think about it. That would be a lot of trouble for me to go to, wouldn't it?"

"But you were so upset with us that you left Kronos."

"Years ago, Alex. It's been a long time. I wonder why you're still so involved with all this. I'm not. Really," she said, touching Alex lightly on the shoulder, "I'm not. I'm sorry this has been so difficult for you. Actually, you know, it's funny. Rather strange, don't you think? How hard it is for us to escape who we are." She looked down. "I wanted to, you know. So much. But, you see, I have learned *something* here in Bangkok. There are *other people,* Alex. Not *just* ourselves. *Not just ourselves,*" she repeated in a fierce whisper. "And we must do what we can for them. How wonderful—how absolutely wonderful—it is that they are there." She stopped, and looked into Alex's eyes.

Alex felt suspended, for an instant, in the strong sunlight, powerful, complete shadows, the purple and yellow tracery of the colonnades.

Tienn said, "This can be a good thing, Alex, the problem that brought you here. Don't you see?"

Alex looked at the holo to distract herself. No, she didn't quite see. But,

as she examined the holo, she found that the intense jealousy of seeing Tienn's other pieces in Kronos had vanished, leaving an emotion that had her close to tears. What was it? She wanted to say something, but wasn't sure, yet, how to say it, or even what it was.

And something intrigued her. "How did you do the—?"

"That was very difficult," said Tienn. She understood instantly that Alex was talking about the time-lapse element of the work. "Here's what I did."

Quickly, Tienn showed her how to do it. It would have taken anyone else laborious hours to understand how Tienn leapt from number to number, but Alex understood it as if she were thinking of it herself. For a moment, she was back in Kronos, and much younger, grateful for the moment her older clone, often so aloof, took to spend with her.

"There, Twig," said Tienn. For the first time, Alex didn't mind. "You keep it. The things I'm doing now are . . . very different. Alex, I've never done anything so important in my life."

"They *are* different," said Alex. "I got a copy of your new work today."

Tienn looked up suddenly. "What new work? How long have you been here, anyway?"

"The boat. And—another. I've only been here a day. How could you stand to work on the other?"

"The other?"

Alex opened her skinflap and showed Tienn the chip.

Tienn began to pace. She walked into the sunlight and turned, and Alex saw that her face looked different, as if her thoughts had changed her musculature. There was a transparency about her, a hardness, a quality like fire. She weighed at least ten pounds less than Alex, and moved as if she had studied martial arts with much more fervor than Alex's dabbling. Yet she look exhausted somehow, spent.

"Wrong question. How could I stand to *not* work on it? You enjoyed that boat holo, didn't you? Just like your student days. Indulge in a little sentimentality, my dear, it's all right. I know what that's like. So enchanted with this primitiveness. It took me a while to see behind it."

Tienn sat before an intricate stone carving. She pulled a tiny panel from it, input a code swiftly on the panel that was revealed, and took out a chip wallet when a small door swung open.

"Pointless agony," she said, looking down at the wallet. "Pointless. It's all here. If people on Mars only knew how these petty officials follow the Law of 2050 to the letter and profit so very well! It would make them sick. But tourists, you see, are carefully guarded. Everyone who deals with tourists is licensed, and they'll lose their livelihood if they pass along a bit of the truth. Not much that is bad gets back, I think. I'm trying to open their eyes with art—that's the only thought that's saved me lately, since my speech. What good did that do? Riots, killing, more suffering. I

came to see that law must be changed at its source. That's all. It's quite simple. People must be *shown* what it's really like here. Only these will be very difficult to smuggle out, I think."

"Tienn, art can't open people's eyes."

"Then what good am I?" said Tienn. "What the fucking good are you?"

"I never—" began Alex, feeling confused.

Tienn looked at her suspiciously and interrupted. "How did you find me? That should have been my first question. I was just so surprised to see you. I trust you, of course. But you're so naïve."

"The tuk-tuk driver brought me here after the police picked me up. They thought I was you—"

Tienn cursed and reached for her stunner. "You didn't tell me the police picked you up!"

Alex was bewildered. "It doesn't matter. Suraphong—"

Tienn laughed. "A spy, idiot. A spy. The police needed your voiceprint, that's all. The whole damned city can be accessed by voiceprint. Oh, no wonder they picked you up."

"But voiceprint access—that's against the law. And it's post 2050 technology."

"Oh, come on, Alex. This is a police state pure and simple. Wake up, girl. Sure, people won't stand for that on Mars, but you can't get into a hovel here without a voicecard. Not anymore. I get mine on the black market, of course; I have friends. But it's tricky. It's all on net and eventually the computers can break through and pick up your speech elements. I had friends who erased me from the record. I altered my voice for the speech, but even that was dangerous. And stupid. They figured out who I was and where I lived in a matter of hours. Of course, by then, I had . . . moved."

"So why live in any one place?" asked Alex.

As Tienn spoke, she handed Alex a stunner; Alex didn't tell her she'd never held one before. "I *needed* to make holos like the one you bought. Can't you see for yourself? Don't you understand? That's the first one out. I have a network to distribute more copies at last; that was difficult. I've never worked with an underground before. To make the holos I need my equipment; a place. I couldn't endanger friends by staying with them. Look, we have to go, right now. I don't know why they didn't just come and kill me right away. I guess it's because they want that—" she nodded toward the wallet—"Ah, you can be sure they're listening—see?" she picked a clear patch from behind Alex's ear and threw it down.

An alarm went off then, and Alex heard shouting and scuffling from the corridor the girl had led her down. The bright parrots rose as a group from the garden. Tienn handed the wallet to Alex and said, very close to her ear, "Brian's aunt—is she still in the legislature?"

There was no time for Alex to reply. The sound of running footsteps

filled the house, echoed on the tile floors. Stunguns flashed in the cool dark room. Tienn pushed Alex behind a large pot, and rolled toward another.

She was shot just before she made it. Alex would never forget her scream of pain, or the way she just stopped there, on the intricate pattern of the tiles—blue, white, green; blue, white, green—while monkeys chattered in the trees. Sun poured into the courtyard, illuminating Tienn's face, the red blood pouring onto the floor. Bullets, was the only thing Alex could think. Obsolete.

Suraphong stepped from the shadows, gun in hand.

"Throw the stunner out first, Miss Alex," he said. "You don't want to die, do you? You do have high clearance. That was the truth. We have nothing on you, a famous artist. There is no reason for you to turn up missing. Particularly after I have the holo chips Tienn gave you."

Alex had no idea how to use the stunner. She put it down and rose slowly from her crouch.

Tienn's most important work was in her hand, clearly visible to Suraphong. Alex realized, now, exactly what Tienn had been up to.

And why. "It would be bad for the tourist trade if anything happened to me," she managed, wondering why she felt so very lucid.

"Exactly," said Suraphong. "Besides, you appear to be quite apolitical. Simply an artist. Anything you say would just be a drop in the bucket, I'm afraid. As far as I can tell, you seem completely inept."

Alex handed him the precious wallet.

"I have seen one of these," he said. "I have never seen anything so dangerous."

He picked out each chip singly, put it carefully on the cool tile, and ground it with the heel of his sandal. He did this nine times, slowly. Alex watched him kill Tienn nine times over. But somehow, she was able to be strangely careful with her anger.

"What about your dead sisters?" she asked, and was pleased that her voice did not tremble.

Suraphong just looked at her. "I must also ask you to give me whatever you bought at the holo market. Your credit record displays a purchase."

She opened her own wallet and gave him the morning holo.

"I must have everything in there," he said. "I heard you speak of 'another.' "

"Those are all mine, my creations, *my* work," she said, though they meant less than nothing to her now.

"Of course," he said, and took it from her.

"Those are quite valuable, you know," she said. "And copyrighted as well."

He put the wallet in a little pouch, and looked up. "How fortunate that

I recognized you in the restaurant. This has been quite a stroke of luck."

Alex felt sick. "I would like to have Tienn cremated," she said.

"We will send her ashes to Mars," said Suraphong.

Alex turned and left. He didn't try and stop her.

Alex trudged up the three hundred steps to the temple. They were ancient; cracked. She wondered if Brian would actually be there. He'd been so undependable lately.

An old man matched her step for step, playing a *saw* in her ear. At intervals he said, "I carved this myself. It is not from a factory. It took me three months. For you, only six hundred newbaht."

She didn't even answer him. But he didn't give up. He was like a mosquito, pestering her as she gained the summit and stepped onto the temple's wide, intricate plaza.

She watched a group of monkeys splash and scold one another in the stream below. The city was not so loud here; she looked out over it and felt the memories of Tienn hit her one by one. She wondered why she couldn't cry.

"Five hundred newbaht, Madam Offworlder," hissed the old man. He tickled her ear with a little tune, skillfully played. The morning holo. She'd played the *saw* in that. The old man's music made this dangerous foreign world seem of a piece. It was alive in a way Mars was not. The short tune Tienn had played, so close to her death, repeated itself within her mind, a counterpoint to the old man's melody. It didn't seem possible that Tienn was dead. If she hadn't come, Tienn would still be alive.

Absently, she shook her head at the old man and turned toward the interior of the great complex.

An emaciated woman wearing only a thin, dingy sari was sitting in some sort of little booth. When she saw Alex looking at her, she smiled.

Alex's eye was carried past the woman. There was another booth next to hers, like a tiny gazebo just big enough for one person to sit inside, then another—a row of them. Each was about two meters high, with a stone floor and a roof supported by a column at each corner.

Alex stepped closer to the first one, and saw that there were intricate carvings on each inch of surface: women and men sitting, dancing, coupling. Monkeys, flowers, gods and goddesses. Each booth was covered with cosmology. They looked the same from a distance, but each told a different story, like the stories of pain she still carried in her skinflap.

"Three hundred fifty, beautiful Offworld Madam," whispered the musician, fiddling a light tune as she knelt in the bright, hot sun and rested her elbows on one of the sills.

She looked down the row of tiny temples, through one window and out the next, on and on. She could see no end to it; the arched opening repeated itself, echoing down the plaza.

Monkeys chased one another through them. Incense filled the air. The old man next to her pulled the tiny bow across the strings; his plaintive music bound the scene together. She stood up.

"Two hundred newbaht," she said.

"Three hundred fifty," insisted the man. "That is not much for you. It is a lot for me."

"Three hundred," she said. Just because she was a fool was no reason to appear to be one. She would gladly have given him a thousand, suddenly.

He bowed. "Very well. Three hundred." She gathered the newbaht from her money pouch, put them in his hand. He counted them carefully, then handed her the instrument.

Where *was* Brian, damn it?

She put the bow to the strings and drew it across, moved her fingers tentatively. Now what was that Tienn had played?

Then Brian touched her shoulder. "I'm sorry about this morning," he said. "What have you done all day? What's that? More junk to take back to Mars? How much did you pay for it?"

Alex barely heard him. The tone of the *saw* was sweet and pure.

"You did a fine job," she told the old man.

"Of course. You play?" he asked.

She didn't answer him right away, but tried a few more halting notes.

Tienn's melody grew from her memory—her *memory?* she wondered—as she looked down the infinitely receding row of huts engraved with their pictures of pain and joy.

"Alex, do you know I'm here?" asked Brian.

"I'm not going back to Mars," she said.

"What? Don't be ridiculous."

Alex continued. "I don't think you'll miss me too much. But I have something for you to take to your aunt. And more will be coming later. Nine more. Exactly as they were. And—maybe others."

"Nine more *what,* Alex? What are you talking about? You can't stay here."

She wanted to tell him Tienn was dead, and why she died. But she couldn't, just yet. "I can't do what I need to do unless I'm here."

"What do you need to *do?*"

She turned to the old man.

"I play," she said. "Listen."

Tienn's intense music focused within her, flowed into her fingers, and filled the hot, thick air. ●

NEXT ISSUE

We have an exciting line-up in store for you in May, one that will take you from the dim beginnings of time to the troubled future, as well as to worlds of myth that never existed—but which perhaps should have!

TOP-FLIGHT PROFESSIONALS

Jack McDevitt returns to take us on a taut and suspenseful chase through the ages, one as full of surprises and unexpected turns as history itself, and one that proves that "Time-Travelers Never Die"; William Barton, making his *Asimov's* debut, gives us a harrowing new take on what happens after someone pushes The Button, in the hard-hitting and compelling "Age of Aquarius"; Eleanor Arnason, who won the James Tiptree Memorial Award for her acclaimed novel *A Woman of the Iron People*, examines the Matter of Britain and the stuff of Arthurian legend from a totally fresh and unexpected perspective, in an enchanting and evocative telling of "A Dog's Story"; Steven Utley settles down with a sly glint in his eye to tell us all "A Silurian Tale"; and the madcap Leslie What lets us in on a funny and fast-breaking story, straight from tomorrow's headlines, filling us all in on how "The Goddess Is Alive, and, Well, Living in New York City."

EXCITING FEATURES

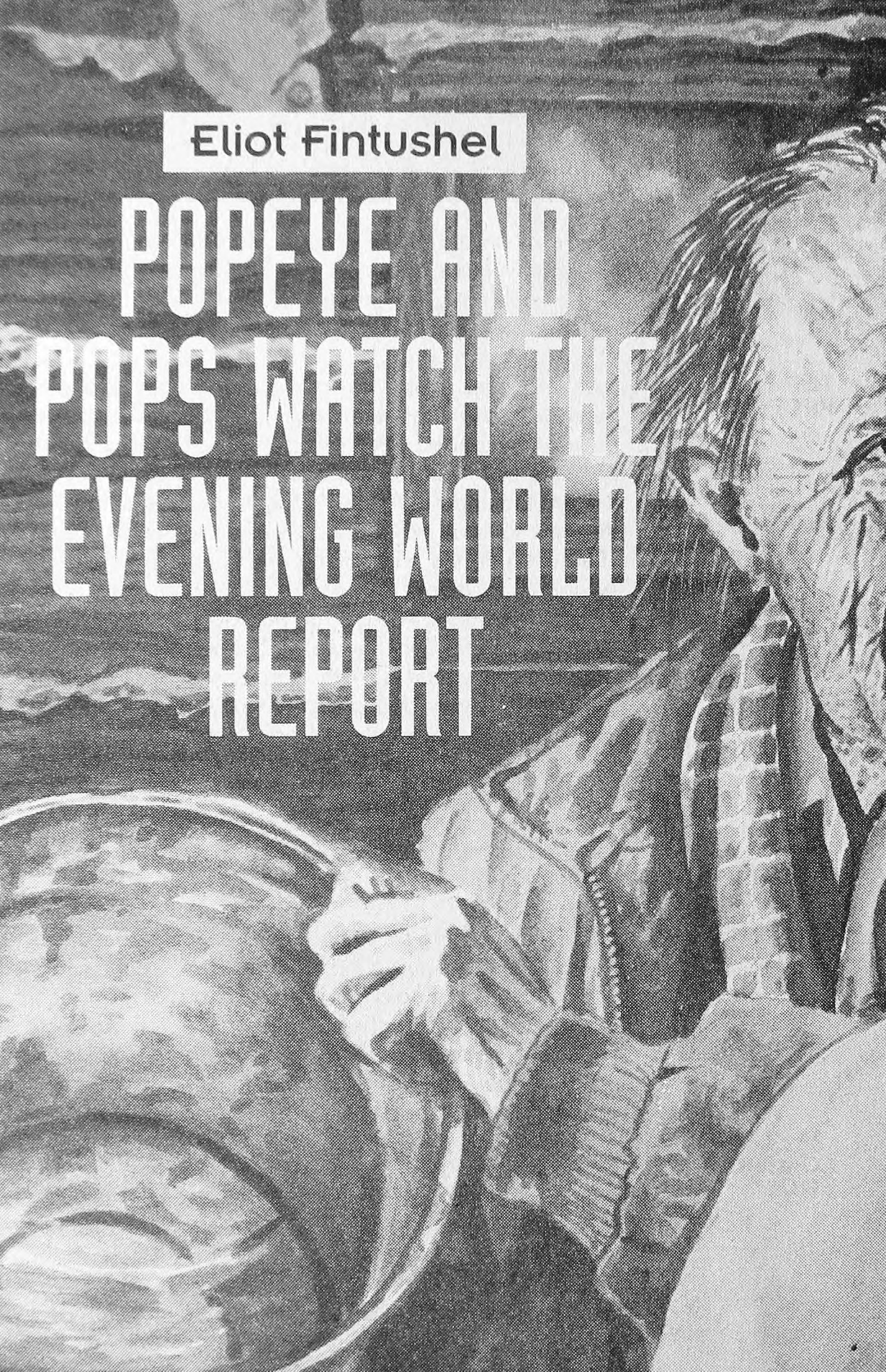
Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column speculates about "The Dinosaur in the Living Room"; Moshe Feder brings us "On Books"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, letters, and other features. Look for our May issue on sale on your newsstand on March 26, 1996, or subscribe today and be sure to miss none of our upcoming issues!

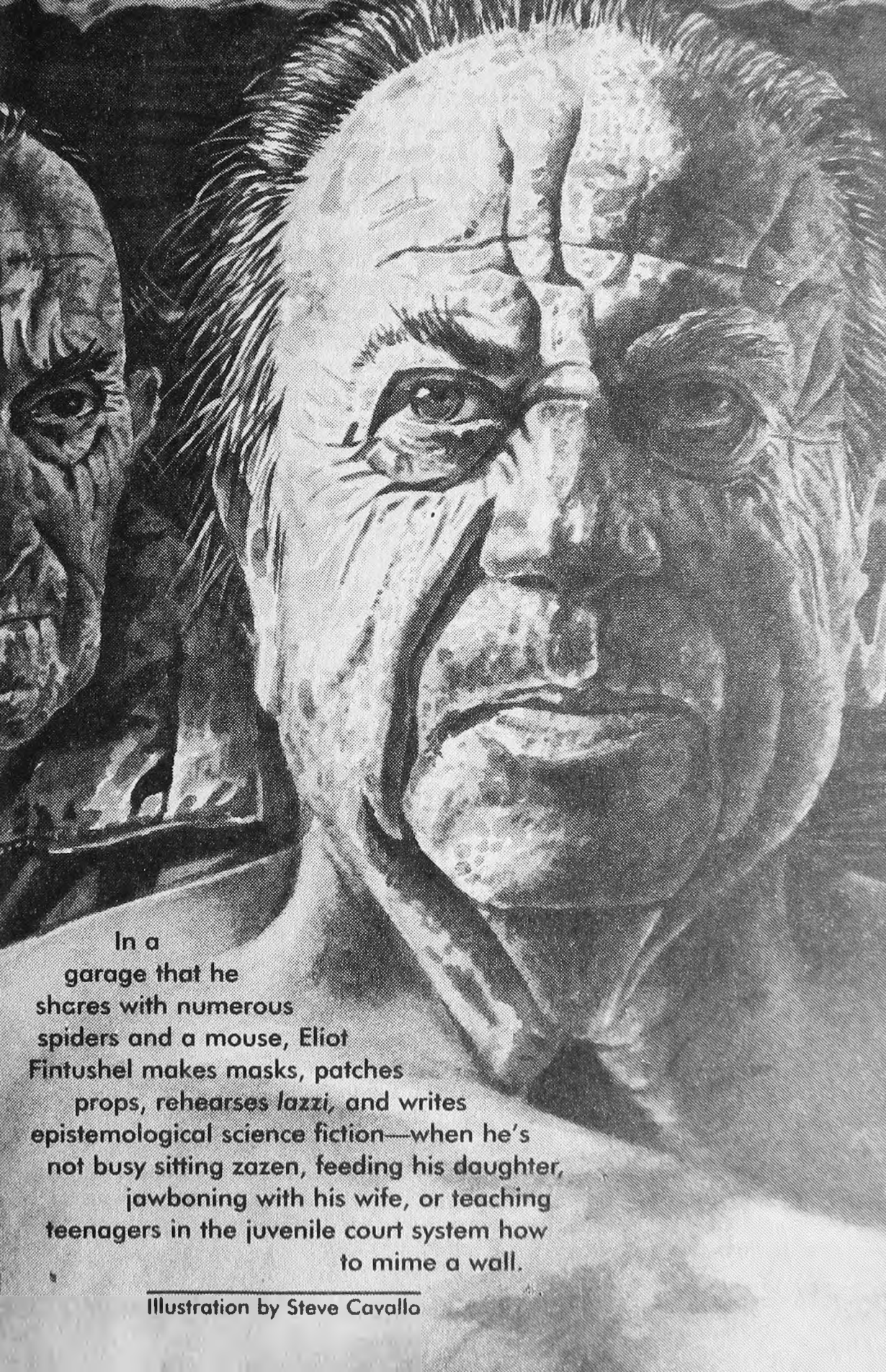
COMING SOON

James Patrick Kelly, Paul Park, Mike Resnick, Charles Sheffield, Tanith Lee, Bruce Sterling, Michael Bishop, Mary Rosenblum, Michael Swanwick, Tony Daniel, Brian Stableford, Rebecca Ore, Robert Reed, John Kessel, Brian W. Aldiss, Charles L. Harness, Ben Bova, Ian Watson, Avram Davidson, Eliot Fintushel, and many more.

Eliot Fintushel

POPEYE AND POPS WATCH THE EVENING WORLD REPORT





In a garage that he shares with numerous spiders and a mouse, Eliot Fintushel makes masks, patches props, rehearses *lazzi*, and writes epistemological science fiction—when he's not busy sitting zazen, feeding his daughter, jawboning with his wife, or teaching teenagers in the juvenile court system how to mime a wall.

Illustration by Steve Cavallo

Popeye and Pops kept a dead raccoon in a busted fridge outside the tin hut they called home. When I asked where the bathroom was, Pops said, "You wanna take a bath?" He laughed beer smell right in my face. Popeye was kinder. He explained that I must mean the toilet, and he showed me outside to the ditch by the windbreak.

They called them "staygrants" in Orleans County, migrants who had come up from the South in buses and car pools to harvest the apples, peaches, plums, and pears, and then stayed on through the winter, working at the cannery or doing odd jobs. They settled in, somehow. They got hired for pruning in the spring. They drank. People began to take their presence for granted in Holley, in Albion and even in Brockport, and the staygrants were careful to stay predictable. Popeye and Pops were like court jesters, for example. People in town thought they were crazy and harmless, and so they let them be. They let them work and drink and jabber about their magic *poojum*.

Myself, I never thought they were crazy or harmless. From the beginning, I believed that Popeye and Pops knew something that I desperately needed to find out. One day when my girlfriend was at a dance class, I invited Pops into my rented farmhouse on North Main Street Road. He was timid at first, but once inside, he acted like he owned the place, and me.

"Why you let someone plant those flowers around you?" he said, taking another pull of his Budweiser. "Don't you know they making a grave for you?" It gave me a shiver. I always felt a little funny about those tulips. "Sure," said Pops. "You can't let a body plant flowers around you. Hey, some folks put flowers around me, my man, and I still here a thousand million year later." Pops said crazy things. He liked my house, he said. He could see how it might come in handy one day. He wanted to know whether I had a TV, not for now but for later, he said. Then we sat outside on the front porch to have some coffee.

A hundred yards away down Main Street Road, my middle class neighbor was talking to a friend. Pops cocked his ear and started talking to them the way a baby talks to angels, bobbing his head and staring into space. "Yes, yes," he said, "Those pool chemicals got to be changed! That's right! Keep that water clean, clean! You better, hear? That's right! What for lunch, honey? Honey that lunch up, Mister! You gonna have flowers round you just like my man here. Mm-hmm!"

He was just like a voodoo man. Near and far meant nothing to Pops—that's how I saw it. The night after I met them, I dreamed of Popeye and Pops in that tin hut that Leland Bower let them use while they worked his orchards. I dreamed that Pops lay awake nights like a huge satellite dish, picking up gossip from seven counties and sending more gossip back, while Popeye guarded the door and chanted magic words to keep me and the townies away.

One night I was lost in the snow with Corinne in the wide marshy field that separated our place from Leland Bower's house. Our electricity had gone out and we were sure it must be a blown fuse, but we didn't know where to look for it, and we didn't have a phone. Leland would know what to do, and he liked to talk to college students like me. But in half an hour Corinne and I managed to get ourselves lost, soaked to the bone, and howling mad at each other for not remembering the way.

That's when we bumped into Popeye and Pops. I thought I heard a voice coming from the windbreak—"They here!"—and then we saw them. They were doing something awful in the middle of the frozen stream. Pops was holding something dead. Popeye had his face in it. They were doing something that people used to do long ago, before we forgot how or got taught not to. Corinne pretended not to see; in fact, I never got her to admit that she'd seen anything out of the ordinary that whole night.

Pops looked up at me and grinned. He knew that I recognized something. "This could be for you," he said.

"Don't mystify him," Popeye told his friend. "Don't mystify that boy." He was cleaning the thing's blood off his face with a handful of snow and wiping it on his sleeve. Pops shoved the dead thing under his torn cloth coat. "I'll fix your electricity," Popeye told me.

"How did you know it needed fixing?" Corinne asked him.

There was a still moment. I could hear branches scraping and creaking in the chill wind. I could hear the moon rising. Then Popeye said, "Look! Your lights is all out." Pops started laughing so hard, he had to slap a hand over his mouth and nose to hold the laughter in.

"You follow me," Popeye said. "You don't need no Leland Bower. I'll fix you." He started walking, and we followed behind.

"What makes you think we were headed for Bower's?" Corinne asked.

"I just guessed, Miss," Popeye said uneasily.

There was another peal of wild laughter at our backs. Pops was rolling in the snow, snorting and howling.

"Is he drunk?" Corinne asked me.

"Don't worry about Pops," I said. "He's just like that."

"That's the truth," Pops said, suddenly very solemn, "Pops is just like that, Miss." Then he laughed again.

"I think we should still go to Mr. Bower's," Corinne said. "These guys are nuts."

"Shush," I said. "Pops hears everything."

"I don't give a damn what Pops hears. I'm telling you I want to go to Mr. Bower. What does Popeye know about electricity?"

I shrugged. I said, "I think he knows something."

"You're not going to Bower's with me, then?" She was fuming. She looked at me with disgust. She knew she couldn't find her way across the field alone. Corinne stomped away toward Popeye, who hadn't noticed

that we'd dropped behind, and after that she made a point of keeping twenty yards between us.

Pops tagged behind, poking me and giggling every now and then. "We gonna fix your lights," he said.

It was slow going. The ground was not completely frozen yet; we kept sliding down into trenches of mud, and scrambling up, wet and shivering, into another snowdrift. When we reached the road, Pops grabbed my coat and held me at the edge of the field while Popeye and Corinne crossed over to our dark house.

"Let me go. I'm freezing," I said. He held me. Pops looked almost sad as he reached into his coat and took out the dead thing to show me.

"We not from here," Pops said. His face was troubled. He wanted something from me, but I couldn't understand what it was. "Looky," he said. He let go of me so he could cradle the thing in both hands. He lifted it tenderly right up to my face. It smelled a little like ether, a smell that seemed to slice through my nostrils and the side of my head and speak directly to my nerves and brain. It was a smell deep in memory, cellular memory, electrical memory, before the womb, before the egg, before the chromosome.

I don't know what the thing looked like. I was overwhelmed by that odor. I just kept staring in amazement right into Pops's bloodshot eyes. Pops stared back and nodded. I wanted to bury my face in that thing.

Then Corinne called out. Pops pushed the dead thing back in his coat and laughed hard. "Let's git." The lights had gone on. I crossed the road with Pops, and we entered the cold house. Popeye was splitting wood with the hatchet I kept by the wood stove. He had already gotten a small fire going. Corinne had started some water boiling on the hotplate for coffee.

"Let me take a hot shower here," Pops said.

Corinne looked at him like it was the craziest thing she had ever heard a human being say. I said, "We don't have a shower, Pops."

"You got a wash tub and a pail?"

"I'm going to bed." Corinne turned away. "You men do whatever the hell you want to do. Thanks for fixing the fuse. Don't let the water boil over, okay?"

"Don't go to bed, Miss," Popeye said.

"What?"

Pops said, "The man said, don't you go to bed, Miss."

"She's tired," I said. "I'll make the coffee."

"She's not tired," Pops said.

"Don't put words in her mouth," Popeye told Pops. Then to Corinne: "Are you tired, Miss?"

"No," she said, "as a matter of fact I'm not. I just don't want to be in here with you because I think your friend is out of his mind, and my

boyfriend isn't man enough to kick him the hell out of here. You've been very nice, Popeye, but I'll be grateful if you finish rubbing your sticks together and go home." Corinne stormed into the bedroom and shut the door.

"This is bad," Popeye said. "She can't go to sleep."

"Don't fret about it," said Pops. "No way she gonna sleep now."

"What are you guys talking about?" I said.

"Did you show him?" Popeye asked Pops.

"Just started," said Pops. "Where's the tub?"

"In the little room off the kitchen," I said, "but why do you need Corinne?"

"We don't need her," Popeye explained. "We just need that she don't sleep."

Pops was dragging the tub in close to the woodstove. "I needs a bucket and hot water."

I started drawing hot water for him from the kitchen sink. The pipes had frozen and burst a few days earlier but were working well enough now.

"I'm glad you like Corinne's company," I said. "So do I."

"We don't like no Corinne's company," Pops scowled. "Ask him if he still gots the TV," he said to Popeye.

Popeye said, "Pops wants to know do you got a TV?"

"Sure." I went into the bedroom, where Corinne was curled up under four blankets. "I'm taking the television in to Pops," I whispered.

"Close the door, Alex." I turned around and closed the door. It was dark in the bedroom. "Come here." I sat down on the bed and leaned close. "Alex, I want you to get rid of them. I want you to get rid of them *now*."

"He's taking a shower. You know they haven't got anything over there in that shack."

"We haven't got anything over here in *this* shack. Get rid of them, Alex."

"I'm taking the TV." I unplugged it and carried it out of the room. When I closed the door again, I heard something thud against it from the other side. Probably her pillow. We had lately begun to break things and to throw things at each other when we were angry, which was often.

Pops was standing naked in the tub. His clothes, except for the coat, were piled up on the floor next to the tub. He would not let go of the coat; something precious was rolled up in it. The bucket was flowing over into the steel sink. I put down the TV and shut off the water, then carried the bucket over to Pops.

Pops was a big man, barrel-chested and muscular, though he sagged around the middle. Popeye, on the other hand, was skeletal.

"Here," I said, offering Pops the bucket.

"No," said Pops. "You give the bucket to Popeye to pour on me. You go plug in the TV. We wanna see the Evening World Report."

I set up the TV so Pops could see it as he showered. From inside the bedroom, Corinne shouted, "Is that man naked in the living room?" No one paid her any attention. Synthesized strains of Beethoven's Fifth, the theme music for the Evening World Report, were just beginning. The anchor man, a substitute, someone I didn't recognize, was shuffling papers at his desk.

"Hold the water ready," Pops told Popeye. To me, he said, "we come from far away, you hear me, boy? Far, far away! That's the truth."

"That's the truth," Popeye echoed. "All Pops says is gospel true."

Something heavy slammed against the door. "Are they gone yet?" Corinne shouted.

"All Pops says is gospel true," said Popeye. "It's true in this place. It was true in the other. If we stuck here another million million years, it be true. If we be back home this night, it still be true."

"Tune that in better," Pops told me. I fiddled with the rabbit ears till the ghosts went away. Behind the anchor, numbers flashed with percent signs and dollar signs. There was a pie graph, followed by a bar graph and then pictures of long lines of grey people bundled up against the cold.

Pops started to unwrap the thing in his coat. "Pour a little," he told Popeye. "Ouch! That's hot, hot, hot!"

"Is it too hot?" I said.

"Quiet now," Pops warned me.

I looked at Pops's head, and I couldn't stop looking. The flesh had melted away where the hot water had hit him. Pops's scalp was gone. The skin was folded down over his forehead and ears, hanging over the nape of his neck like damp rubber from a burst balloon. Nor was there a cranium to speak of. The bone had scattered like ash, powdering what was left of Pops's face with a fine white dust.

Something else hit the door. Corinne shouted, "I hate you, Alex!"

Popeye asked, "Can we lock that door?"

"Not from this side," I said.

"Never mind that," Pops commanded. "Turn up the juice on the Evening World Report, you. And you, Popeye, pour me some more hot."

I made it louder. "But it's just a commercial," I said.

"It's just a commercial!" Pops laughed as hot water erased his eyeballs, nose, ears, and the upper part of his jaw, burning streaks down to his ankles as if it were nitric acid. His brain slipped down like liver into a grinder, settling into his mouth and then his throat. Pops continued to stand erect. Pops continued to speak, although there seemed no place left for a voice to come from. "Just a commercial!" he howled.

Popeye said, "We don't know no commercial from no nothin' else. You see sun and you see sex, but it all just hot to Pops. If you please, now pinch the *poojum* before it fall away." He pointed to the thing cradled in Pops's melting hands. I pinched the end of it between the thumb and

forefinger of my right hand. There was that smell again, acrid and cutting, reminding me of things no human being has a right to remember.

"Damn you, are you burning something in there?" Corinne shouted. We could hear her start to get up out of the bed.

"More hot!" cried Pops. And to me: "You, pull, man! Pull it to the tube, man! Give it to the big bow tie."

"To the what?" I said.

"Quick now!" Popeye said, pouring. "Are you deaf? To the big bow tie! Give it to the big bow tie!"

I was still pinching the thing. I had stretched it away like bubble gum. The scent made my head spin. "What are you talking about?" I said. "I see the bow tie, but how am I supposed to . . ."

"Give, man! Give it!" Pops sang out. There was little left of him besides a vertebral column balanced on the coccyx, dripping slime, which smoked and ran in rivulets into the old wash tub. I could not see which part of it held his end of the poojum, but he held it still. "This my moment, man! Give it quick, before the sports news!"

"If it go to the sports news, we gots to wait another thousand million years," old Popeye said.

The door pushed open. Corinne came out in her bathrobe, brandishing an iron lampstand.

"Do it now!" Pops commanded.

I pressed the gummy end of *poojum* onto the TV screen where the image of the anchor man's bow tie floated.

"Pour!" screamed Pops. Popeye poured. The house filled with steam, carrying that strange, ancient smell into every room, into every crevice. The string of *poojum* connecting the TV screen with the sliver of Pops sizzled and vibrated in widening arcs. The TV man droned on. Corinne was gasping, falling toward the vibrating string. Popeye leapt toward her, deflecting her from it, so that she fell backward into the bedroom. The lampstand clattered to the floor.

"She out!" shrieked Pops. There was no more of him now than a peak of whipped cream, with the *poojum* on top, gradually sinking in, just as Pops's brain had sunk down through his old body before.

"She out cold!" said Popeye. There was fear in his voice. "She out, Pops! How'm I gonna leave this place? How'm I gonna go with my Majesty now?"

"The sports news isn't on yet," I said. It was as if it were an evening in someone else's life, a dream on the operating table, vivid but remote.

"He right," Pops declared. "Slap that Corinne. Wake that Corinne. She your ticket to ride, Popeye."

"Corinne!" I shouted, trying to be helpful. "Get up, honey! Get up! Wake up!"

"She out cold," Popeye whimpered. "Goodbye, Pops! Goodbye, my lord!"

"That's it, Popeye, my dear! You a loyal servant. Take the *poojum*. I gonna scoop you back to me, Popeye. Hold the *poojum* and wait."

On the TV, a woman in a blue blazer was reading football scores. The string of *poojum* hummed, then snapped. The steam, the smell, and the dark, viscous remains of Pops all whirled, roaring, into the insignia on the sportscaster's blazer.

"Goodbye, lord!" moaned Popeye, staring at the TV.

Then there was only the wind rattling the window panes and the dit-dit-dit-dah of the closing music for the Evening World Report. Popeye was scuttling around, picking up Pops's clothes and putting things away. He had already secreted the *poojum* somewhere on his person.

The top of the woodstove was glowing red. I grabbed Corinne's coffeepot off the hotplate. All the water in it had boiled away, and the metal was burning and stinking. I opened the door and laid the pot down in the snow. It sizzled. I left it there and went back into the house.

I felt drugged. Popeye stood before me as if he were waiting for permission to leave. "She gonna be all right," he said. "Just a bump on the head." His face was streaked with tears.

The TV was babbling behind us. "How did you get stuck here in the first place?" I said. "Who was it that planted flowers around Pops?"

"You don't wanna hear about *them,* son. They big. They old. They got more names than your earth and moon. We don't wanna talk about pyramids now, and big lizards and volcanos and holes in the sky."

"Is Pops back home now?"

"He got through."

"What happens to you?"

"I'll get by."

"What did you need from Corinne?"

"Her anger, son, just her powerful anger. I don't think you would understand."

"You probably don't want me to talk about any of this."

"It don't matter. Everybody knows I gots my *poojum*."

We caught each other's eye. Popeye laughed, and I tried to.

"I best be going now," he said.

I let him out the door and watched him disappear into the snowy field.

Corinne was moaning and pulling herself to her feet. "What happened?" she said.

"You fell," I said. "Are you okay?"

"I think so. My head hurts. Where did everybody go?"

"Pops went home after the Evening World Report. Popeye just left."

"Did Pops take his shower?"

"Yes."

"Alex, please don't let those men in here again."

"Okay, Corinne," I said.

Corinne shook her head and lumbered back into our small, dark bedroom. "Come on," she said.

"Corinne . . ."

"Yes, Alex?"

I looked at Corinne, sleepyhead, in her long, cotton nighty, wisps of brown hair half-covering her face, sweetly drowsy. There were no big lizards or volcanos in those eyes. She only wanted me, and a good night's sleep.

"It's a big world, Corinne," I sighed.

"I know it," she said. She came back out of the bedroom and kissed me. "You look lost, Alex."

"Your coffeepot's a goner, Corinne. I burned it."

"Don't worry,"—leaning her forehead against my cheek.

"Do you think our bulbs will make it through the winter?"

"Always have," she yawned.

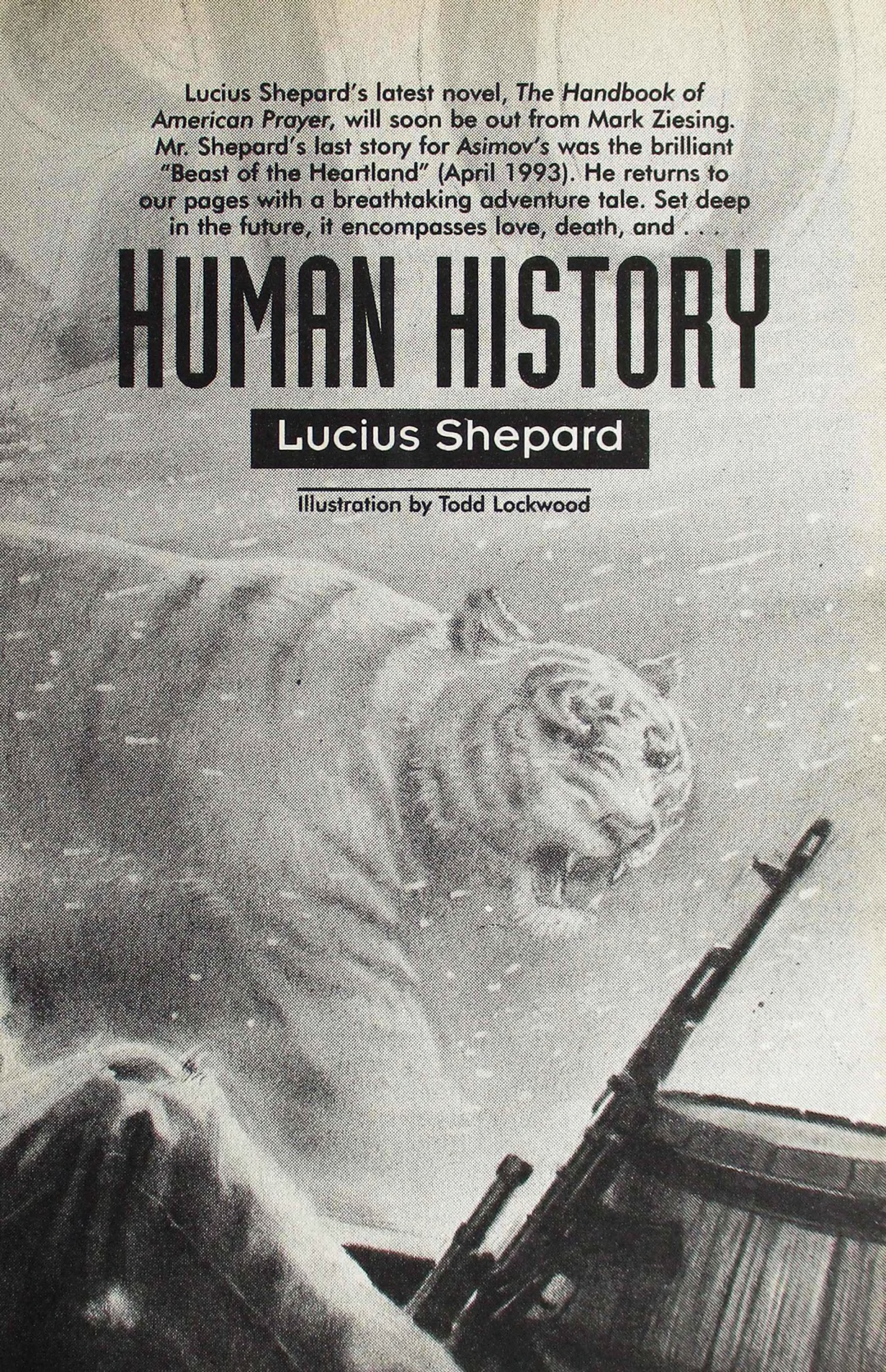
Tired as I was, I lifted Corinne into my arms—she smiled—and I carried her to bed. ●

Lucius Shepard's latest novel, *The Handbook of American Prayer*, will soon be out from Mark Ziesing. Mr. Shepard's last story for *Asimov's* was the brilliant "Beast of the Heartland" (April 1993). He returns to our pages with a breathtaking adventure tale. Set deep in the future, it encompasses love, death, and . . .

HUMAN HISTORY

Lucius Shepard

Illustration by Todd Lockwood



Stories, I'm told by old Hay (who's told enough of them to pass for an expert), must have a beginning and middle and end that taken altogether form a shape, a movement that pleases the mind of the listener. And so in order to give my chronicle of those weeks in Edgeville and the land beyond a proper shape, I must begin before the beginning, create a false beginning that will illuminate the events of later days. I'm not sure this is the most truthful way to go about things. Sometimes I think it would be best to jump right in, to leap backward and forward in chronology like an excited man telling his story for the first time; but since I've never written anything down before, I guess I'll play it conservative and do as old Hay has advised.

This happened in the summer, then, when the apes and the tigers keep mostly to the high country, the snow peaks east of town, and strangers come from Windbroken, the next town north, and from even farther away, with goods for trade or maybe to settle, and it's more-or-less safe to ride out onto the flats. Edgeville, you see, is tucked into a horseshoe canyon of adobe-colored stone, its sides smoothly dimpled as if by the pressure of enormous thumbs; the houses and shops—shingle-roofed and painted white for the most part—are set close together toward the rear of the canyon, thinning out toward the mouth, where barricades of razor wire and trenches and various concealed traps are laid. Beyond the canyon the flats begin, a hardpan waste that appears to stretch into infinity, into a line of darkness that never lifts from the horizon. Out there live the Bad Men and the beasts, and on the other side . . . well, it's said by some that the other side doesn't exist.

I'd taken a little roan out onto the flats that morning to look for tiger bones, which I use for carving. I rode east toward the mountains, keeping close to the cliffs, and before I'd gone more than a couple of miles I began to hear a mechanical hooting. Curious, I followed the sound, and after another mile I caught sight of a red car with a bubble top parked at the base of a cliff. I'd seen a couple like it last time I was to market in Windbroken; some old boy had built them from plans he'd gotten from the Captains. They were the talk of the town, but I didn't see much point to them—only place level enough to drive them was out on the flats. Whoever was inside the car wore a golden helmet that sparkled in the sun. As I drew closer, I realized that the driver was pressing the middle of the steering wheel with the heel of his hand, and that was causing the hooting noise. He kept it up even after I had pulled the roan to a halt beside the car, acting as if he didn't notice me. I sat watching him for half-a-minute, and then shouted, "Hey!" He glanced at me, but continued beating on the steering wheel. The sound was wicked loud and made the roan skittish.

"Hey!" I shouted again. "You don't quit doin' that, you gonna bring down the apes."

That stopped him . . . for a moment. He turned to me and said, "You think I care 'bout apes? Shit!" Then he went back to beating on the wheel.

The helmet had a funny metal grille across the front that halfway hid his face; what I could see of it was pinched, pale, and squinty-eyed, and his body—he was wearing a red coverall that matched the car's paint—appeared to be starved-thin. "You may not care 'bout 'em," I said. "But you keep up with that nonsense, they gonna start droppin' rocks down on you. Apes like their peace and quiet."

He stopped making his racket and stared at me defiantly. "Ain't gonna happen," he said. "I'm a man of destiny. My future is a thing assured."

"Yeah?" I said with a laugh. "And how's that?"

He popped open the bubble top and clambered out. The roan backed off a few paces. "I'm gonna cross the flats," he said, puffing up his chest and swaggering in place: you might have thought he was ten feet tall instead of the puny piece of work he was.

"That right?" I said, gazing west toward nothing, toward that empty land and dark horizon. "Got any last requests? Messages to your kinfolks?"

"I 'spect you heard that before," he said. "You probably get lots out here tryin' to make a crossin'."

"Nope, never met anybody else that much of a damn fool."

"Well, you never met nobody with a map, neither." He reached into the car, pulled out some bedraggled-looking papers and shook them at me, causing the roan to snort and prance sideways. He glanced from side to side as if expecting eavesdroppers and said, "This world ain't nothing like you think it is . . . not a'tall. I found these here maps up north, and believe you me, they're a revelation!"

"What you gonna do with the Bad Men? Hit 'em over the head with them papers?" I got the roan under control and slipped off him; I must have stood a head taller than the driver, even with his helmet.

"They'll never spot me. I'm goin' where they ain't got the balls to go."

There was no point in arguing with a lunatic, so I changed the subject. "You ain't gonna have a chance to hide out from the Bad Men, you don't quit hootin' at the apes. What for you doin' that, anyway?"

"Just gearin' up," he said. "Gettin' up my energy."

"Well, I'd do it out away from the cliff if I was you."

He glanced up at the clifftop. "I ain't never seen them apes. What're they like?"

"They got white fur and blue eyes . . . least most of 'em. 'Bout the size of a man, but skinnier. And 'bout as smart, too."

"Now I don't believe that," he said. "Not one lick."

"I didn't neither," I said. "But I know someone who went up amongst 'em, and after he come back, well, I believed it then."

He looked at me expectantly. I hadn't been meaning to get into it, but seeing that I had nothing pressing, I told him a little about Wall.

"The man was huge," I said. "I mean I never seen anybody close to that big. He musta stood close to seven feet . . . and he wasn't just tall. He was big all over. Chest like a barrel, thighs like a bull. Man, even his fingers were big. Bigger'n most men's dinguses, if you know what I'm talkin' 'bout."

The driver chuckled.

"One peculiar thing. He had this real soft voice. Almost like a woman's voice, just deeper. And that just accentuated his ugliness. Shit, I seen apes better lookin'! He had these big tufted eyebrows that met up with his hairline. Hair all over him. He come from one of them ruined cities up to the north. A hard place, the way he told it. Lotta Bad Men. Cannibalism. Stuff like that. But he wasn't no savage, he was all right. Didn't say much, though. I figger he liked the apes 'bout as good as he did us."

"He went and lived with 'em, did he?"

"Not 'lived,' " I said. "Not exactly. Kinda hung around 'em, more like. He was helpin' us, y'see. The apes they steal our babies, and he thought he might be able to get 'em back."

"And did he?"

The roan grunted and nuzzled the driver's chest; he swatted its nose.

"He said we wouldn't want 'em back, the way they was. But he told us a lot 'bout how the apes live. Said they had this cave where they . . ." I broke off, trying to remember how Wall had described it. The wind blew lonely cold notes in the hollows of the cliff; the sky seemed the visual counterpart of that music: a high mackerel sky with a pale white sun. "They'd taken the skulls of the people they'd killed, busted 'em up and stuck 'em on the walls of this cave. Stuck 'em flat, y'know, like flattened skull faces all over the walls and ceiling. Painted 'em all over with weird designs. Our babies, our kids, were livin' in the cave, and the apes, they'd go into the cave and fuck 'em. Girls, boys. Didn't make no difference. They'd just do 'em."

"Damn," said the driver, sympathizing.

"Now don't that sound like they smart like men?" I said. "Don't it?"

"Guess it does at that," he said after a bit. "Damn."

"You don't wanna mess with them apes," I told him. "I was you, I'd be movin' my car."

"Well, I reckon I will," he said.

There was nothing more I could do for him. I mounted up, swinging the roan's head so he faced toward the dark end of everything.

"What you doin' out here?" asked the driver.

"Just huntin' for tiger bones," I said. "I carve shit from 'em."

"Huh," he said as if this were a great intelligence. Now that he saw I was making to leave, he didn't want to let me go. I could tell he was scared.

"You don't think I'm gonna make it, do ya?" he said.

I didn't want to hex him but I couldn't lie. "Not hardly. It's a long way to forever."

"You don't understand," he said. "I got maps, I got secret knowledge."

"Then maybe you'll be all right." I wheeled the roan around and waved to him. "Luck to you!"

"Don't need it!" he cried as I started away. "I got more heart than that horse of yours. I got . . ."

"Take it anyway!" I shouted, and spurred the roan westward.

How did it happen, this world? Our ancestors decided they didn't care to know, so they told the Captains to take that knowledge from them. Maybe I would have done the same if I was them, but sometimes I regretted their decision. What I did know happened was that one day the Captains came down from the orbital stations and waked the survivors of a great disaster, brought them forth from the caves where they were sleeping, and told them the truth about the world. The Captains offered our ancestors a choice. Said they could live up on the stations or on the earth. A bunch of our ancestors flew to the stations to take a look-see: it must have been pretty bad, because not a one wanted to emigrate. The Captains weren't surprised; they didn't think all that highly of themselves or of their life, and our ancestors got the notion that maybe the Captains felt responsible for what had happened to the world. But no matter whether or not they were responsible, the Captains were a big help. They asked our ancestors if they wanted to remember what had happened or if they wanted to forget; they had machines, they said, that could erase memory. Our ancestors apparently couldn't live with the idea of all that death behind them, maybe because it was too close to deal with easily, and so they chose to forget. And they also chose further to reject many of the old world's advantages, which is why we have rifles and horses and hydroponics and no more . . . except for our hobbies (like the man in the gold helmet with his bubble car) and the hospitals. The hospital in Edgeville was a long silver windowless building where we went to get injections and also where we talked to the Captains. We'd punch a black stud on a silver panel and their images would fade in on a screen. It was almost never the same Captain, but they looked a lot alike and they wouldn't say their names. Ask them, and they merely said, "I am the Captain of the Southern Watch." They have these lean pale faces and wet-looking purplish eyes, and they are every one skinny and nervous and not very tall. The apes and the tigers? My guess is that there were animals in the sleeping caves, too. Our ancestors could have had the Captains do away with them; but maybe it was decided that enemies were needed to keep us strong. I used to hate our ancestors for that, though I suppose I understood it. They wanted a challenging life, one that would make us hardy and self-sufficient, and they got that sure enough. Gazing

out from the Edge into that rotten darkness at the end of the flats, you had the idea you were looking back into that gulf of time between now and the destruction of the old world, and you'd get sick inside with the feelings that arose. That alone was almost too much to bear. And on top of that the Bad Men burned our houses and stole our women. The apes defiled our children, and the tigers haunted us with their beauty . . . Could be that was the worst thing of all.

How did this world happen?

That's the whole of what I used to know about human history, and even now I don't know a whole lot more. It wasn't enough to make a clear picture, but for seven hundred years it was all the knowing most of us wanted.

I woke one morning to the smell of snow in the air. Snow meant danger. Snow meant apes and maybe tigers. The apes used the snow for cover to infiltrate the town, and sometimes it was all we could do to beat them off. I rolled over. Kiri was still asleep, her black hair fanned out over the pillow. Moonlight streamed through the window beside her, erasing the worry lines from her brow, the faint crow's-feet from around her eyes, and she looked eighteen again. Visible on her bared shoulder was the tattoo of a raven, the mark of a duelist. Her features were sharp, but so finely made their sharpness didn't lessen her beauty: like a hawk become a woman.

I was tempted to wake her, to love her. But if it was going to be a big snow, soon she'd be up in the high passes, sniping at the apes filtering down, and she'd be needing all the sleep she could get. So I eased out of bed and pulled on my flannel shirt and denims, my leather jacket, and I tiptoed into the front room. The door to Bradley's room was open, his bed empty, but I didn't worry much. Here in Edgeville we don't baby our kids. We let them run and learn the world their own way. What little worry I did feel was over the fact that Bradley had lately been running with Clay Fornoff. There wasn't much doubt in anybody's mind that Clay would wind up a Bad Man, and I just hoped Bradley would have better sense than to follow him the whole route.

I cracked the front door, took a lungful of chill air and stepped out. Our house was at the back of the canyon, and the moonlight was so strong that I could see the shapes of separate shingles on the hundreds of roofs packed together on the slope below. I could see the ruts in the dirt streets brimful of shadow, the fleeting shapes of dogs, blazes of moonlight reflected from a thousand windows, and at the center of it all, the silver rectangle of the hospital. Leafless trees stood sentinel on the corners, and darkness looked to be welling through the mouth of the canyon from the flats. If I strained my eyes, I thought, I might could see eight thousand souls shining in their little frame shacks.

I walked at a brisk pace down through the town. The shadows were sharp, dead-black, and the stars glittered like points of ice. My boots made husking noises on the frozen dirt, and my breath steamed, turning into ice chips on my beard. From the sty in back of Fornoff's store I could hear the muffled grunt of some pig having a dream.

Fornoff's was a lantern-lit barnlike place, with sacks of meal and garden tools stored up in the rafters, the walls ranged by shelves stocked with every kind of foodstuff, most of it dried or preserved. Brooms, bolts of cloth, small tools, and just about everything else were stacked in corners or heaped in bins, and in the back was a cold box where Fornoff kept his meat. A group of men and women were sitting on nail kegs around the pot-bellied stove, drinking coffee and talking in low voices; they glanced up and gave a wave when I entered. Dust adrift in the orange light glowed like pollen. The fat black stove snapped and crackled. I wrangled up another keg and joined them.

"Where's Kiri at?" asked Marvin Blanks, a tall, lean man with a horsy face that struck a bargain between ugly and distinctive; he had a sticking plaster on his chin to cover a shaving nick.

"Sleepin'," I told him, and he said that was fine, he'd pick her a mount and fetch her when it came time.

The others went back to their planning. They were Cane Reynolds, Dingy Grossman, Martha Alardyce, Hart Menckyn, and Fornoff. All in their early to mid-thirties, except for Fornoff, who was beer-bellied and vast and wrinkled, with a bushy gray beard bibbing his chest. Then Callie Dressler came in from the back with a tray of hot rolls. Callie was about twenty-five, twenty-six, with a feline cleverness to her features. She had a deep tan, blackberry eyes, chestnut hair to her shoulders, and a nice figure. You could see her nipples poking up her wool shirt, and her denims couldn't have been any tighter. She was a widow, just moved to town from Windbroken, and was helping out at the store. According to Fornoff's wife, the reason she'd moved was to kick up her heels. Windbroken is fairly strait-laced compared to Edgeville. Among the population of Windbroken we had the deserved reputation of not being too concerned over who was sleeping with whom . . . maybe because having to deal with the apes and the tigers gave us a less hidebound perspective on the importance of fidelity. Anyway, I was made both pleased and nervous by Callie's presence. Kiri didn't mind if I got it wet away from home once in awhile, but I knew how she'd react if I ever got involved with anyone, and Callie was a temptation in that regard: she had in her both wildness and innocence, a mixture that has always troubled my heart. And so when old Fornoff announced that he was assigning me and Callie to guard the front of the store, I was of two minds about it. Not that the assignment didn't make sense. What with Callie being new, me not being much with a rifle, and the store being hard to get at, it was probably the best place

for us. Callie smiled coyly and contrived to nudge my shoulder with her breast as she handed me a roll.

I'd been intending to go back and wake Kiri myself, but the snow began falling sooner than I'd expected. Marvin Blanks heaved up from his keg, said he was going to fetch her and stumped out. The others followed suit, and so it was that at first light, with snow whirling around us, I found myself sitting hip-to-hip with Callie in the recessed doorway, blankets over our knees and rifles at the ready. The sky grayed, the snow came in big flakes like bits of ragged, dirty wool, and the wind sent it spinning in every direction, howling, shaping mournful words from the eaves and gutters. All I could see of the houses across the street were intimations of walls and dark roofpeaks. It was going to be a bad one, and I didn't try to avoid Callie when she nestled close, wanting all the creature comforts I could get.

We talked a little that first hour, mostly just things such as "You got enough blanket?" and "Want some more coffee?" Every so often we heard gunfire over the wind. Then, just when I was starting to think that nothing much was going to happen, I heard glass breaking from the side of the store. I came to my feet and told Callie to stay put.

"I'm comin' with you," she said, wide-eyed.

"No," I said. "Someone's got to watch the front. Stay here. I'll be back in a minute."

Out in the wind, my beard and eyebrows iced up at once. Visibility wasn't more than a few feet. I kept flat against the wall until I reached the corner, then jumped out, leveling my gun. Nothing but whirling snow met my eye. I eased along the wall, my heart pumping. Suddenly the wind spun the flakes in a kind of eddy, clearing an avenue of sight, and I spotted the ape. He was standing about a dozen feet away beside a broken window, his fur almost the same dirty white color as the snow, and he was carrying a bone club. He was a scrawny specimen, old, his fur worn down to the nub in patches, and the black mask of his face as wrinkled as a prune. Yet in the center of his face were set two young-looking blue eyes. It's hard to think of blue eyes being savage, but these were. They blinked rapidly, seeming to semaphore rage and shock and madness, and their force stunned me for a split-second. Then he came at me, swinging the club, and I fired. The bullet reddened his chest and blew him backward into a drift. I went over to him, keeping the rifle trained. He lay spread-eagled, looking up at the toiling sky. Blood was bubbling from his chest, miring his fur, and for a moment his eyes fixed on me. One hand clenched, his chest heaved. Then the eyes jellied and went dead. Snowflakes fell down to cover them. Watching them whiten, I felt a touch of regret. Not for him personally, you understand, just the sort of generalized, winnowing sadness you feel when you see death happen.

I walked back to the front of the store, calling as I went to Callie so she

wouldn't think me an ape and shoot. "What was it?" she said as I settled next to her.

"Ape," I said. "An old one. He probably wanted to die, that's why he was tryin' for the store. They know the odds are against them this deep into town."

"Why'd he do that?" she said, and from the depth of her perplexity, the innocence of her question, I realized that she was so young and vital, it could never be made clear to her how apes and people will just up and grow weary of the world.

"Beats me," I told her. "Just crazy, I guess."

While we kept watch, she told me some about Windbroken. I'd only visited the town twice and hadn't thought much of it. Prettier than our town, that's for sure. With nicer houses and picket fences and larger trees. But the people acted as if that prettiness made them superior: seems they don't have quite enough danger in their lives to keep them real. Callie didn't strike me that way, however, and I figured that she had found her rightful place in Edgeville.

She cuddled closer to me, and before long she slipped a hand under the blanket and rested it on my thigh, moving her fingers a bit, enough to get my dingus twitching. I told her to stop it, and she grinned. "What for?" she asked. "Don't you like it?"

"That ain't the point." I lifted her hand away. "I'm married."

"Oh, I heard 'bout how married you are from Miz Fornoff." She shifted away, acting huffy. "Says you 'bout as married as a tomcat."

"That ol' woman don't know nothin'!"

"Don't tell me that! She ain't the only one talks 'bout you." Her grin came back, sexy and mischievous. "Claire Alardyce, Martha's girl? You oughta hear what she says! And Laney Fellowes, and Andrea Simpkins—she told me 'bout the time you and her went out on the flats and . . ."

"Well, so what?" I said angrily. "It's no business of yours what I do!"

"Not yet."

"Not ever!"

"Why?" She asked this with the stubborn rectitude of a child denied a treat. "Don't you think I'm pretty?"

I couldn't say she wasn't, so I got by with, "You're all right."

"If I'm just all right," she said, pitching her voice husky, "how come you try to see down my shirt every time you come in the store?"

I shrugged and stared off into the snow. "Just 'cause a man takes a peek, don't mean he's gonna buy the goods."

"You don't have to peek," she said.

The odd tremor in her voice made me turn to her. She had opened her coat and was unbuttoning her shirt, exposing the plump upper slopes of her breasts: they were as brown as the rest of her and looked full of juice. She slipped loose another button, and I could see one of her nipples, erect,

the dark areola pebbled from the cold. I swear to God, I think my mouth started to water. She had the shirt mostly unbuttoned now, and she took my free hand and brought it over to cup one breast. I couldn't help giving it a squeeze, and when I did, she arched into the pressure, closed her eyes and let out a hiss of pleasure. Next thing I knew, I was bending to her and putting my mouth where my hand had been, and she was saying my name over and over, saying it soft so I could just hear it above the wind and pushing my head down into a sweet warmth that smelled of harsh soap and vanilla water. And then she stiffened, froze right up, and was pushing me away, whispering my name with an different kind of urgency. "What's the matter," I asked, and she nodded her head toward the street, her lips parted, eyes bugged. I looked around and forgot all about Callie Dressler's breasts.

Standing in the middle of the street was a tiger . . . and not just an ordinary tiger, if any of them can be said to be ordinary. He appeared to be more than twice the length of a man, and his head would have come at least to my shoulder. His fur was pure white, and his stripes were vaguely drawn the way some lines are in a delicate charcoal sketch. In the thick eddying snow he kept vanishing and reappearing as would a dream creature or the image of a beast surfacing in a magic mirror. But he was no dream. The wind brought his heavy scent to me, and for the time he stood there, I lived in terror that the wind would shift, that he would twitch his head toward us, burn me with those yellow eyes like sad crystals.

I had seen tigers prowling the slopes of the mountains at a distance, but never had I been so close to one, and it seemed that the vast weight of his life was diminishing mine, that if he were to stand there long enough I would be crushed and transformed into some distillate of being. I had no thought for my gun, for Callie, and barely any thought for my own safety. All my thoughts were as insubstantial and flighty as the flakes whirling about his massive head. He remained motionless for several seconds, testing the wind. His tail lashed, he made a small thunder in his throat, and then he sprang off along the street, disappearing into a tornado of snow that spun up from one of the drifts.

My chest ached, and I realized I had stopped breathing. I continued staring at the spot where the tiger had been. I turned to Callie, my mouth open. She lifted her eyes to mine, and a scratchy sound came from her throat. "I . . ." she said, and gave her head a shake.

"I know," I said. "God almighty damn!"

Her face seemed to have been made even more beautiful by the apparition of the tiger, as if the keenness of the sight had carved away the last of her baby fat, hollowing her cheeks, bringing out the sensitivity and soulfulness of the woman she would become. In that moment she looked to have captured something of the tiger's beauty, and maybe she had,

maybe we both had, because she was staring at me as intently as I at her, as if she were seeing a new element in my face. I don't remember wanting to kiss her, I just did. The kiss lasted a long, long time. Like the tiger, it was not ordinary. It was a kind of admission, that kiss, an ultimate acknowledgment, and it was far more of a threat to Kiri and me than had been my fumbling with Callie's breasts. It was an event that would be very hard to pull back from. We stood most of the remainder of the watch in silence, and we didn't get cozy again. We talked stiffly of inconsequential matters and were overly solicitous of one another's comfort. Both of us knew that what might have been a fling had gotten out of hand.

We had a tiger between us, now.

It had been bad up in the passes, Kiri said. Charlie Hatton had been bitten in the neck, Mick Rattiger's skull had been crushed. Four men dead altogether. She stripped off her clothes and stood by the bedroom window, staring out at the moonstruck snow, her tawny skin drenched in whiteness. Dueling scars on her stomach and arms. Lean and small-breasted, with long fluid muscles running from thigh to buttock, and wings of black hair pulled back from her face: she posed a polar opposite to Callie's almost teenage beauty, her butterfat breasts and berry mouth. She slipped beneath the covers, lay on her back and took my hand. "How was it with you?" she asked.

I wanted to tell her about the tiger, but I didn't have the words yet, the words with which to tell *her,* anyway. My incapacity had only a little to do with Callie; I wanted to tell Kiri in a way that would open her to her own beauty. She'd never been a happy woman; too much of her was bound up by the disciplines of a duelist, by the bleakness of her youth in the northern ruins. She expected death, she believed in the lessons of pain, and she lived by a harsh code that I could never fully understand. I think she looked upon Brad and me as an aberration on her part, a sign that she had grown soft.

"Shot an ape," I said. "That's 'bout it."

She made a dry, amused noise and closed her eyes.

"I saw Bradley," I said. "He did fine, but I think he's off with Clay again tonight."

"He'll be all right."

She turned on her side to face me and caressed my cheek, a sign that she wanted to make love. Directness was at odds with her nature: she lived by signs, hints, intimations. I kissed her mouth, the tiny crow tattoo on her shoulder. Pressing against me, her body felt supple, sinuous, all her muscles tensed as if for battle. There's always been a mean edge to our lovemaking, and that night was no exception. She seemed to be fighting me as I entered her, and she clawed my back so fiercely, I had to pin her wrists above her head, and when she cried out at the end, it sounded

like a cry of victory, a celebration of triumph over her body's resistance to pleasure.

She went to sleep almost immediately afterward, and I sat on the edge of the bed, writing at the night table by the light of the moon. I was trying to write some words for Kiri, talking not about the tiger, but about how it had been that night with her. I had, you see, come to the realization of how much I loved her, how much I wanted to split open her hard shell and make her bloom at least for a season. Whatever I felt for Callie, I decided, was nothing by comparison, no matter if it was real.

But thinking all this made me restless and unhappy, and no words would come. So I dressed, grabbed a rifle and went for a walk, going knee-deep through the snowcrust, ploughing ahead, having no real destination in mind. The town was quiet, but there were maybe a dozen fires flickering atop the canyon walls, and from those fires came the howling of apes mourning their dead. They'd be coming back with the next storm. The rooftops were mantled with snow; snow ledged the windows and marbled the boughs of the leafless trees, and the sound of my breath seemed harsh and unnatural in all that white stillness. I turned a corner and came in sight of the hospital, its silver metal walls flashing and rippling with the moonlight. Seeing it, I realized that therein lay the only soul to whom I could speak my heart, the only one who was bound to listen and who would be sure to feel the current in my words. I walked to the door, put my hand flat against an inset silver rectangle, and after a second the door slid open with a hiss. I stepped into the anteroom. Soft light began to shine from the walls, and a whispery voice asked if I needed treatment.

"Just a little conversation," I said.

The room was about fifteen by fifteen, and a large screen occupied most of the rear wall, fronted by three chairs of silver metal and some sort of foam. I plopped into one and punched the black button. The screen brightened, dissolving to a shot of a solitary Captain. A woman. It's difficult to tell sometimes what sex they are, because they all wear the same purple robes, almost the exact dark shade as their eyes, and their hair is uniformly close-cropped, but I knew this one for a woman, because when the picture had come into focus, she had been turned a bit sideways and I could see that her robe was pushed out a tad in front. Her skin was the color of the winter moon, and her cheeks were so hollowed that she looked toothless (yet she was pretty in an exotic way), and her eyes were too large for her face, a face that registered a gloomy, withdrawn quality during the entire time we talked.

"What's your name?" I asked; I always hoped one of them would just say to hell with it and come clean.

"I am the Captain of the Southern Watch." Her voice was so soft as to be toneless.

I studied her a moment, thinking where to begin, and for some reason I decided to tell her about the tiger. "Listen," I said. "I want your promise that you're not goin' to go off and hurt yourself after I'm done."

She appeared reluctant but said, "You have my word."

You had to get this out of them before you tell them anything fraught with emotion, or else they were liable to kill themselves; at least that was what I'd heard all my life. Their guilt over what happened to the world was to blame . . . or so I thought at the time. But sometimes I would think that we were to them like the tigers were to us: beautiful strong lives that wounded them by merely being.

"Ever see a tiger?" I asked.

"Pictures of them," she said.

"Naw, I mean up close . . . so close you could smell it."

The idea seemed to trouble her: she blinked, her mouth thinned and she shook her head.

"I saw one that close this morning," I said. "Twenty, twenty-five feet away."

I went on to tell her of its heart-stopping beauty, its power, how I couldn't breathe on seeing it; I told her what had happened as a result between me and Callie. I could see my words were hurting her—her bony fingers curled into fists, and her face grew strained—but I couldn't stop. I wanted to hurt her, to make her feel as diminutive and worthless as the tiger had made me feel. I knew this wasn't fair. No matter if the Captains were responsible for the way things were, they weren't responsible for tigers; I was sure that either tigers or something like them must always have existed to help whomever was around keep things in perspective.

By the time I finished, she was trembling, leaning away from me, as if my words had a physical value that was beating her back. She glanced from one side to the other, then—apparently finding no help for her condition—she turned back to me. "Is that all?" she said.

"Why do you talk to us?" I asked after a pause. "You obviously don't enjoy it."

"Enjoy?" The concept seemed to perplex her. "You are our lives."

"How can that be? We don't know your names, we never see you in the flesh."

"Do the important things of your life all lie close at hand?"

I thought about it. "Yeah."

She shrugged. "Then in this we are different from you."

I tipped my head, trying to see her in a new light, to read the world behind that pale mask. "But you want us close at hand, don't you?"

"Why do you think that?"

"Just a theory of mine."

She arched an eyebrow.

"Y'see," I said, "you got us livin' with a limited technology, but whenev-

er somebody wants to know somethin' new, a hobby, you let 'em investigate whatever it is . . . less it's somethin' too big. I figure you're lettin' us work our way to you."

Her eyes narrowed, but she said nothing.

"I've talked to a whole buncha you people in my time, and I get the idea you're ashamed of what you are, that you don't want us to see it . . . 'least not 'til we're strong enough to swallow whatever it is you're hidin'."

"Suppose that is the truth," she said. "How would you feel about us?"

"Probably not much different from now."

"And how is that?"

"Tell you the truth, I don't feel much 'bout you one way or the other. You're just faces and voices is all, and you don't have any real mystery to you like there is to stuff like God. You're like distant cousins who never come to visit, and who nobody misses at family reunions."

The hint of a smile lifted the corner of her mouth. I had the idea my answer had pleased her, though for no reason I could fathom.

"Well," I said, standing, picking up my rifle. "It's been fun."

"Goodbye, Robert Hillyard," she said.

That irritated me, her knowing my name and the reverse not being true. "Why the hell won't you tell us your names?" I asked her.

She almost smiled again. "And you claim we have no mystery," she said.

Days, I worked in the hydroponic shed, a long low building of caulked boards and plastic foam two streets east of the hospital. The shed and its contents were my hobby, and I liked breathing its rich air, mixing chemicals, watering, strolling along the aisles and watching the green shoots that had pushed up. I would hum, make up songs and forget about everything else. Nights—at least for the next couple of weeks—I spent with Kiri. She had a duel coming up, and she was working herself up into that fierce calm in which she did her best fighting. It wasn't to be a duel to the death—she had stopped fighting those when Brad came along—but you could get hurt badly enough in a first blood duel, and she was deadly serious. Kiri was one of the best there was. It had been years since she'd lost, but now, in her thirties, she had to work harder than ever to keep her edge. Sometimes there was just no being around her during her preparation. She would snap and snarl and dare you to say Boo. On several occasions I thought about dropping over to Fornoff's and seeing how Callie was doing; but I managed to resist the impulse. Kiri needed me, and I knew that pretty soon she would have to give up dueling, and then she'd need me even more to help her get through that time. So whenever it became necessary for her to have some solitude, I would take a rifle and climb up to the north wall of the canyon and see if I could pick off an ape or two. The north wall was higher than the south, where the apes tended to congregate, and was cut off from the ape encampments by a

deep cut that we had mined with explosives and otherwise booby-trapped. Though it was a clear shot, you couldn't see the apes very well unless they started dancing around their fires; even then, the range was so extreme, you had to be lucky to score a hit. Funny thing was, they didn't seem to mind when you did; they just kept dancing.

One night Brad and I climbed up to the top of the north wall. He was a lanky kid of thirteen and favored Kiri some, having her black hair and thin, hawkish face. We staked ourselves out behind a pile of loose rocks, rested our rifles across our knees and sat back to enjoy the night air. The weather had warmed a little; the sky was clear, and the stars were winking with such intensity they looked to be jumping from place to place. It was so quiet, the silence had a hum. There were fires on the south wall, but no apes in sight, and we got to talking about this and that. I could tell there was something weighing on his mind, but he couldn't seem to spit it out. Finally, though, he screwed up his courage and told me what was troubling him.

"Y'know Hazel Aldred?" he said.

"Big ol' girl?" I said. "Kinda pretty, but on the heavy side?"

"Yeah." He dug his heel into some loose gravel and set to carving out a trench.

"Well, what about her?"

"Nothin'," he said after a bit; he stared off toward the south wall.

I studied him and made a guess. "Don't tell me you been gettin' prone and lowdown with ol' Hazel?"

"How'd you know?" He pushed hair back from his eyes and stared at me fiercely. "Who told you?"

"It don't take no genius to figure it out." I aimed at a distant fire and squeezed off an imaginary round. "So what about it?"

"Well . . ." More digging with his heel.

"Didn't go so hot. . . . That it?"

He ducked his eyes and mumbled, "Uh-huh."

I waited for him to say more, and when he kept quiet, I said, "Am I gonna have to tell this story?"

Silence.

"Lookit, Bradley," I said. "I been gettin' my share for a long time now, and I'm here to tell you, it don't always work out so hot, no matter how many times you done it."

"That ain't what Clay says."

"Shit! Clay! You believe everything he tells you?"

"Naw, but . . ."

"You're goin' on like you do!"

On the south wall a solitary ape capered for a moment in front of a fire, looking like a spirit or a devil dancing inside the flame. To ease the pressure on Brad, I took aim and sent a round in the ape's direction.

"Didja get him?"

"Don't see him," I said. "But I think he just went to ground."

Wind sprayed grit into our faces.

"Anyway," I went on, "I can't tell you the times it's gone bad for me with the ladies. Mostly the limps, y'know. Too much drinkin', or just a case of nerves. That what happened to you?"

"Naw." Bradley trained his rifle on the south wall, but had no target; his mouth was set grim.

"Guess I can't think of but one other thing that coulda happened," I said. "Maybe you was a little too excited to begin with."

"Yeah," he said sharply.

"And how'd she take that?"

He worried his lower lip. "She told me to clean off her dress," he said finally. "And everybody laughed."

"Everybody?"

"Clay and the rest."

"Damn, Bradley," I said. "I ain't gonna tell you not to go down with a crowd. I mean it happens that way sometimes. But it sure is a lot nicer to do it with just you and whoever."

"I ain't never gonna do it again," he said sullenly.

"Now I doubt that."

"I ain't!" He fired a round into nowhere and pretended to watch it travel.

"Why you feel that way?"

"I dunno."

"Talk to me, boy."

"I just don't know what to do," he said in a rush. "I mean I seen it, I seen guys hop on and it's over real quick, and the girl she acts like ain't nothin' happened. So what's the damn point?"

He fired a couple of more rounds. Some apes were dancing around a fire near the canyon mouth, but he hadn't been aiming that way.

"Listen up, son," I said. "Like I said, I ain't gonna tell you not to do what you been doin'. But I am gonna give you some advice. You listenin'?"

"Yes, sir." He rested the rifle across his knees and met my eyes in that steady, sober way of his mother's.

"All right." I leaned my rifle against my shoulder. "You find yourself a girl who wants to be with you, just you and nobody watchin', and then you take her somewhere nice, maybe up to that storage shack near Hobson's by the rear wall. Got a coupla boards missin', and if you look out, you can see the waterfall."

"Yeah, I know."

"All right. If you start gettin' too excited, you try to think 'bout somethin' else. Think 'bout your mama's duel or somethin' that don't have nothin' to do with the subject at hand. And then, when the time comes

and she wants you in her, you go in slow, don't just jab it home, y'know. And when you're there, when you're in all the way, don't go crazy all at once. Just move your hips the tiniest bit, so little you barely feel you're movin', and then pull out maybe an inch and hold there, and then sink back in and pin her, grind into her, like all you want is to be right where you are or maybe more so. And y'know what that'll do?"

He was all eyes. "Un-uh?"

"No matter what happens after that," I told him, "like as not, you'll have been the first one to treat that little girl like you wanted to be all through her. Most guys, y'see, once they get in the saddle they don't think about what the girl's hopin' to feel. You do what I say, chances are she's gonna think you 'bout the best thing to come along since berries and cream."

"You swear?"

"You're hearin' the voice of experience," I said. "So take it to heart."

He mulled it over. "Y'know Sara Lee Hinton?"

"Oh, yeah!" I said. "Now that's the kinda girl you wanna be dealin' with, not an ol' plowhorse like Hazel." I mussed his hair. "But you ain't got a chance with Sara Lee."

"I do, too!" he said defiantly. "She told me so."

"Well, go to it then," I said. "And remember what I told you. You got it in mind?"

"Yeah," he said, and grinned.

I gave him a shove. "Let's do some shootin'."

Before long, the apes came out in force and took to dancing around their fires like black paper dolls brought to life. We fired round after round with no measurable result. Then as Brad fired, one of the apes did a dive and roll, and went out of sight. I'd seen that move many times; it was a part of their normal style of dancing. But I figured the boy could use another boost in confidence, and I gave him a hug and shouted, "Goddamn! I believe you got him!"

It was three nights later that Clay Fornoff turned Bad Man. Everyone had been expecting it since his trouble with Cindy Aldred, Hazel's big sister. Clay had been sweet-talking her, trying to persuade her to go out onto the flats with him . . . not that she needed much persuasion. Cindy's reputation was no better than her sister's. But even a girl like Cindy likes a little sweet talk, and she was playing hard to get when Clay lost his patience. He slapped her silly, dragged her into the bushes and had her rough and mean. The next day Cindy accused him, and he made no bones that he had done it. He could have suffered plenty, but Cindy must have been soft on him, or else he had something on her that stayed her anger. She asked for mercy, and so Clay was put on warning, which meant that we would all be watching him, that one more slip would buy him a one-way ticket onto the flats.

That night there was a full moon, a monstrous golden round that looked to be hovering just out of reach, and whose light made the canyon walls glow like they were made of light themselves. I was ambling along with Brad past Fornoff's, which had closed down a couple of hours earlier, taking the air, talking, when I heard something crash inside the store. In the corral a few doors down, the horses were milling, pushing against the fence. I shoved Brad behind me and eased around the corner of the store, holding my rifle at the ready. A shadow sprinted from the rear of the store and crossed the street to the corral, then ducked down so as to hide in the shadows. I aimed, held my breath, but before I could fire, Brad knocked the barrel off-line.

"It's Clay," he whispered.

"How the hell you know?"

"I just can tell!"

"That makes it worse. Stealin' from his daddy's store." I brought the rifle up again, but Brad caught hold of it, and begged me to hold back.

The shadow was duck-walking along beside the corral, and the horses, their eyes charged with moonlight, were moving in tight circles, bunched together, like eddies in a stream.

"Let go," I said to Brad. "I won't hurt him."

The shadow flattened against the wall of the dress shop next to the corral. I pushed Bradley back around the corner, aimed at the shadow and called out in a soft voice, "Don't you move now, Clay Fornoff!"

Clay didn't make a sound.

"Get out in the light where I can see you," I told him. "Or I'll kill you quick!"

After a second he did as I'd said. He was a muscular blond kid some five or six years older than Brad, and he was wearing a sheepskin coat that his daddy had bought him up in Windbroken. His mouth was full and petulant, his eyes set wide apart in a handsome face, and in his hands were a shotgun and several boxes of shells. The wind lifted his long hair, drifted it across his eyes.

"What you plannin' to do with all the firepower?" I asked, walking out into the middle of the street.

He gave no reply, but stared daggers at Brad.

"I 'spect you oughta throw down the gun," I said.

He heaved it toward me.

"Shells, too. Just drop 'em, don't throw 'em."

When he had done what I asked, I walked over and gave him a cold eye. "I turn you in," I said, "they'll have you walkin' west without boots or blankets. And if you stick around, I'm bound to turn you in."

He wasn't afraid, I give him credit; he just stared at me.

"Lemme take a horse," he said.

I thought about that. If I were to tell old Fornoff what had happened, I

figured he'd be glad to pay the price of the horse. "All right," I said. "Go ahead. And take the gun, too. Your daddy would want that. But I see you back here, I ain't gonna think twice 'bout how to handle it. Understand?"

All he did by way of thanking me was to grunt.

I kept him covered while he cut out a bay and saddled it. Brad hung back, acting like he was having no part of the matter, but saying nothing. I didn't blame him for not facing up to Clay; I would probably have done the same at his age.

Clay mounted up, pulled hard on the reins, causing the horse to rear. His head flew back, his hair whipping in the breeze, and the moon struck him full in the eyes, making it seem that wicked fires had suddenly been kindled there. For that split-second I could feel how it would be to give up on the law, to turn Bad Man, to take a long ride west of anywhere and hope you come to something, and if you didn't . . . well, for the length of the ride at least you lived as wild and strong and uncaring as a tiger. But Clay spoiled the moment by cursing Brad. He wheeled the bay around, then, and spanked it into a gallop west, and in a second he was gone, with only a few puffs of frozen dust settling on the street to show he'd ever been.

Brad's chin was trembling. God only knows what part of life he had just watched riding out of sight. I patted him on the shoulder, but most of my thoughts were arrowing toward the next morning. It wasn't going to be easy to tell old Fornoff that his son had gone to the Devil for a shotgun and a couple of boxes of shells.

The night before Kiri left for Windbroken and her duel, a couple of months after Clay Fornoff had gone Bad, I tried to talk to her about the future, about when she planned to quit fighting, but she wouldn't have any part of it, and instead of gentling her as I'd intended, I just made her mad. We went to bed strangers, and the next morning she gave me a cold peck on the cheek and a perfunctory wave, and stalked out the door. I can't say I was angry at her . . . more frustrated. Sooner or later, I knew, she was going to be in for a bad time, and that meant bad times for me as well. And perhaps it was my frustration with this sense of imminent trouble that led me to seek out trouble on my own.

That same afternoon I dropped into Fornoff's to buy some seed. Fornoff and his wife were off somewhere, and Callie was the only one on duty. There were a few other customers, and she couldn't leave the counter to go in the back where the seed was stored, so I told her to send it over to the hydroponics building when she had time. She leaned forward, resting her elbows on the counter; her shirt belled, exposing the slopes of her breasts; every little move she made caused them to sway and signal that they were sweet and easy and free for the evening.

"What time you want 'em?" she asked.

"Any ol' time's fine," I said. "Whenever's convenient."

"Well, when do you need 'em?" She laid heavy emphasis on the word "need."

"Ain't nothin' urgent," I said. "But I would like 'em by tomorrow."

"Oh, we can manage that," said Callie, straightening. "I don't get 'round to it 'fore evenin', I'll walk 'em over myself after work."

"Whatever," I said, pretending that I hadn't picked up on the none-too-subtle undertone of the conversation; even after I had left the store, I kept up the pretense and pushed the matter from mind.

The main hydroponics shed was set directly behind the hospital, a long, low building of tin and structural plastic, so low that if you were standing up by my house, the hospital and a low ridge would have blocked it from view, even though it enclosed nearly a dozen acres. Inside, there was corn and tomatoes and lettuce and at the rear, next to the office—a little room with tin walls and a couple of pictures, a desk and a cot where I slept whenever Kiri was away—I'd erected some trellises and was growing grapes. I enjoyed the peace of the place and liked to walk up and down the aisles, checking the nutrients in the tanks, squeezing the tomatoes, petting the corn, generally just feeling at home and master of it all. The greenness of the leaves colored the air, creating a green shade under the ultraviolets, and the muted vibration of the generator created the rumor of a breeze that made all the plants whisper together. I spent a lot of time in the office reading, and that evening I was sitting at my desk with my feet up, reading a book called *The Black Garden* written by a man from Windbroken, a fantasy about the world that used to be. I'd read it before, more than once, as had most other readers in the town. Books were expensive to make, and there weren't many of them. Most pretended to be histories, recounting the innumerable slaughters and betrayals and horrors that supposedly comprised our past, but this one was a refreshing change, featuring a number of color illustrations, several depicting a vast underground chamber floored with exotic plants and trees, threaded by canopied pathways, and the strange dark area that lay beyond it, a lightless cavern choked with black bushes and rife with secret doors that opened into little golden rooms where the inhabitants of the place explored the limits of pleasure. Their idea of pleasure, according to the author, was kind of nasty, but still it beat all to hell the stories of massacres and mass torture that you usually ran across in books. Anyway, I was leafing through the pages, wondering if what the author had written bore any relation to the truth and marveling once again at the detail of the illustrations, when Callie poked her head in through the office door.

"Well, ain't you cozy?" she said, and came on in. "I left the seed out front." She glanced around the room, her eyes lingering on the cot. "Got yourself a regular home away from home here, don'tcha?"

"S'pose I do." I closed the book, looked at her; then, feeling antsy, I got to my feet and said, "I gotta check on somethin'."

I went out into the shed, fiddled with some dials on the wall, tapped them as if that were meaningful. At this point I wasn't sure I had the will or the need to get horizontal with Callie, but then she came out of the office, went strolling along an aisle, asking questions about the tanks and the pipes, touching leaves, and watching her, seeing her pretty and innocent-looking in the green darkness of my garden, I realized I didn't have a choice, that while she had not been foremost on my mind lately, I'd been thinking about her under the surface so to speak, and whenever a gap cleared in the cloudiness of my daily concerns with Kiri and Brad, there Callie would be. She walked off a ways, then turned back, face solemn, a hand toying with the top button of her shirt. I knew she was waiting for me to say or do something. I felt awkward and unsure, like I was Brad's age once again. Callie leaned against one of the tanks and sighed; the sigh seemed to drain off some of the tension.

"You look worried," she said. "You worryin' 'bout me?"

I couldn't deny it. I said, "Yeah," and by that admission I knew we would likely get past the worry. Which worried me still more. "It's Kiri, too," I went on. "I don't know . . . I . . ."

"You're feelin' guilty," she said, and ducked her head. "So am I." She glanced up at me. "I don't know what's happenin'. First off, I just wanted some fun . . . that's all. And I wouldn't have felt guilty 'bout that. Then I got to wantin' more, and that made me feel bad. But the worse I feel"—she flushed and did a half-turn away from me—"worse I feel, the more I want you." She let out another sigh. "Maybe we shouldn't do nothin', maybe we should just go our own ways."

I intended to say, "Maybe so," but what came out was, "I don't know 'bout you, but I don't think I could do it."

"Oh, sure you could," she said, downcast. "We both could."

I knew she meant what she was saying, but there was also a challenge in those words, a dare for me to prove what I had said, to prove that what I felt had the power of compulsion. I went over and put my hands on her waist; I could feel a pulse all through her. She looked up, holding my eyes, and I couldn't do anything else but kiss her.

There's a lot of false in everything that people do, particularly when it comes to the dealings between men and women. There's games played, lies traded, and fantasies given undue weight. But if those things are combined and cooked by the passage of time in just the right way, then a moment will arrive when everything that's false can get true in a flash, when the truest love can be made out of all that artifice, and once the games and the lies have been tempered into something solid and real, the process keeps on going, and you discover what worlds have changed, which lives have been diminished, which ones raised to glory. We can't

know in advance what we make when we go to making love. If we could, maybe there would be a whole lot less of it made. But chances are, knowing in advance wouldn't change a thing, because those moments are so strong they can overwhelm most kinds of knowledge. Even knowing all I do now, I doubt I could have resisted the forces that drew Callie and me together.

We went into my office, and we lay down on the cot, and seeing her naked, I recognized that her sleek brown body was at home here among the growing things, that this was the place for us, surrounded by corn and green leaves and tomatoes bursting with juice, whereas Kiri's place was in that sad, barren little cabin up on the slope, with the apes howling above and a view of emptiness out the bedroom window. I felt that what Callie and me had was something growing and fresh, and that what I had with Kiri was dry and brittle and almost gone, and though it hurt me to think that, it pleasured me to think it, too. I liked being with a woman who was gentle, who didn't force me to take what I wanted, one whose cries were soft and full of delight, not tormented and fierce. I liked the easy way she moved with me, the joyful greed with which she drew me in deep. I knew there were going to be trials ahead, but I wasn't ready to confront them. Kiri would be gone for ten days, and I wanted to relish each and every one.

There was a good deal of little girl in Callie. One minute she could be tender, all concern and care and thoughtfulness, and the next she might become petulant, stubborn, willful. That girlish side only came into play in good ways at the beginning—in bed, mostly—and it plumped up my ego to be able to feel paternal toward her, giving me a distant perspective on her that was as loving in its own fashion as the intimate perspective we shared when we lay tangled and sweaty on the cot in my office. And, too, she brought out the boy in me, a part of my character that I'd had to keep under wraps for the duration of my marriage. Love with Callie was a kind of golden fun, serious and committed, untainted with desperation. It wouldn't always be just fun; I was aware of that, and I was sure we would have our ups and downs. Yet I thought at the core of what we were was that tiger, that emblem of beauty and power, something that could be whirled away in the snow, but would always return to buck us up no matter how painful or difficult the circumstance. However, I had no idea of the difficulties that would arise when Kiri returned from Windbroken.

One afternoon I came into the house whistling, direct from Callie's arms, and found Brad sitting in a straight-backed chair by the closed door of the bedroom. His somber look cut through my cheerful mood, and I asked why he was so low.

"Mama's home," he said.

That knocked me back a step. I covered my reaction and said, "That ain't nothin' to be all down in the mouth about, is it?"

"She lost." He said this in almost a questioning tone, as if he couldn't quite believe it.

There was nothing cheerful I could say to that. "She all right?"

"Got a cut on her arm is all. But that ain't what's bad."

"She's grievin', is she?"

He nodded.

"Well," I said. "Maybe we can nudge her out of it."

"I don't know," he said.

I ran my hands along my thighs as if pushing myself into shape, needing the feel of that solidity, because everything I had been anticipating had been thrown out of kilter. It seemed I could feel the weight of Kiri's despair through the wood of the door. I gave Bradley a distracted pat on the head and went on in. Kiri was sitting on the edge of the bed, bathed in the sunset that came russet through the shade, giving the air the color of old blood. Except for a bandage around her bicep, she was naked. She didn't move a muscle, eyes fixed on the floor. I sat beside her as close as I dared, hesitant to touch her; there had been times she'd been so lost in herself that she had lashed out at me when I startled her.

"Kiri," I said, and she shivered as if the sound had given her a chill.

Her face was drawn, cheeks hollowed, lips thinned. "I should have died," she said in a voice like ashes.

"We knew this time was coming."

She remained silent.

"Damn, Kiri," I said, feeling more guilt and self-recrimination than I had thought possible. "We'll get through this."

"I don't want that," she said, the words coming out slow and full of effort. "It's time."

"Bullshit! You ain't livin' up north no more."

Her skin was pebbled with the cold. I forced her to lie down and covered her with blankets. Then, knowing the sort of warming she most needed, I stripped and crawled in with her. I held her close and told her I didn't want to hear any more crap about it being her time, that here in Edgeville just because somebody lost a fight didn't mean they had to walk out into the Big Nothing and die. And I told her how Brad was relying on her, how we both were, feeling the bad place that the lie I'd been living made inside my chest. I doubt she heard me, or if she did, the words had no weight. Her head lolled to one side, and she stared at the wall, which grew redder and redder with the declining sun. I think she could have willed herself into dying right then, losing had made her so downhearted. I tried to love her, but she resisted that. I guess I was grateful not to have to lie in that way as well, and I just held onto her and talked until it got late, until I fell asleep talking, mumbling in her ear.

I had thought during the night that my attentions were doing Kiri some good, but if anything, her depression grew deeper. I spent day after

day trying to persuade her of her worth, sparing time for little else, and achieved nothing. She would sit cross-legged by the window, staring out over the flats, and from time to time would give voice to savage-sounding chants. I feared for her. There was no way I could find to penetrate the hard shell of misery with which she had surrounded herself. Logic; pleading; anger. None of these tactics had the least effect. Her depression began to communicate to me. I felt heavy in my head, my thoughts were dulled and drooping, and I couldn't summon the energy for even the lightest work. Despite my concern for Kiri, I missed Callie—I needed her clean sweetness to counteract the despair that was poisoning me. I managed a couple of fleeting conversations with her during the second week after Kiri's return and told her I'd get out as soon as I could and asked her to take the late shift at the store, because it would be easier for me to get free after dark. And finally one night after Kiri had taken to chanting, I slipped out the door and hurried down through the town to Fornoff's.

I stood outside in the cold, waiting until the last few customers and then old Fornoff had gone, leaving Callie to close up. Just as she was about to lock the door, I darted inside, giving her a start. She had her hair up and was wearing a blue dress with a small check, and she looked so damn good, with her plush hips flaring from that narrow waist, I wanted to fall down and drown inside her. I tried to give her a hug, but she pushed me away. "Where the hell you been?" she said. "I been going crazy!"

"I told you," I said. "I had to . . ."

"I thought you was gonna tell her 'bout us?" she shrilled, moving deeper into the store.

"I'm gonna tell her!" I said, beginning to get angry. "But I can't right now. You know that."

She turned her back on me. "I don't mean nothin' to you. All that sweet talk was just . . . just talk."

"Goddammit!" I spun her around, catching her by the shoulders. "You think I been havin' a wonderful time this last week? I been livin' in hell up there! I wanna tell her, but I can't 'long as she's like she is now." It stung me to hear myself talking with such callousness about Kiri, but strong emotion was making me stupid. I gave Callie a shake. "You understand that, don'tcha?"

"No, I don't!" She pulled away and stalked off toward the storeroom. "Even if everything you say's true, I don't understand how anyone could be as peculiar as you say she is!"

"She ain't peculiar, she's just different!"

"Oh, well!" She shot me a scornful look. "I didn't know she was different. All I been hearin' 'til now is how she can't satisfy you no more."

"That don't mean she ain't good-hearted. And it don't mean she's pecu-

liar. You know damn well I never said I didn't care 'bout her. I always said she was someone I respected, someone I loved. Not like I love you, I admit that. But it's love all the same. And if I have to kill her so we can get together, then it's sure as shit gonna kill whatever I feel for you." I came toward her. "You just don't understand 'bout Kiri."

"I don't wanna understand!"

"Where she comes from it's so bad, times get hard, they kill the weak ones for food, and when they feel they are worthless, they'll take a walk out into nowhere so they won't be a burden. I know it's hard to understand what that kinda life does to you. I didn't understand for a long while myself."

Her chin quivered, and she looked away. "I'm scared," she said after a second. "I seen this before up in Windbroken, this exact same thing. 'Cept it was the woman who's married. But it was the same. The man she loved, not her husband, this boy . . . When she couldn't leave her husband 'cause he was took ill, he like to gone crazy." Tears leaked from her eyes. "Just like I been doin'."

I started for her, but she backed into the dimly lit storeroom, holding up a hand to fend me off. "You keep away from me," she said. "I don't need no more pain than I got right now."

"Callie," I said, feeling helpless.

"Naw, I mean it." She kept on backing, beginning to sob. "I'm sorry for what I said about her, I truly am. I do feel bad for her. But I just can't keep on bein' self-sacrificin', you hear? I just can't. If it's gonna be over, I want it to be over now."

It was funny how everything we said and did in that dusty old store, in that unsteady lantern light, with the pot-bellied stove snapping in the background, seemed both ultimately false, like a scene from a bad play, and ultimately true at the same time. How it led us toward the one truth we were, how it commanded us to make every lying thing true. The things I said were things I couldn't keep from saying, even though some of them rang like tin to my ear.

"Damn, Callie," I said, moving after her into the storeroom. "You just gotta give it some time. I know it looks bad now, but believe me, it's gonna work out."

She fetched up against the wall next to a stack of bulging sacks of grain; the sacks were each stamped with fancy lettering and the picture of a rooster, and seemed to be leaking their faded colors up to stain the air the grainy brown of the burlap. A barrel full of shovels, blades up, to her right, and coils of rope on pegs above her. She let her head droop to one side as if she didn't want to see what would happen next.

"You believe me, don'tcha?" I said, coming up to her, losing the last of my reason in her smell of warmth and vanilla water, pulling her hips against mine.

"I want to," she said. "God knows, I want to."

Her breasts felt like the places where my hands had been formed, her mouth stopped my thirst. Berry lips and black eyes and brown skin all full of juice. I didn't know her, but I felt she knew me, and sometimes it seems that's the most of love, believing that the other sees you clear. I hitched up her skirt, muffling her protests with my mouth, and wrangled down the scrap of a thing that covered her heat, and then I lifted her up a bit and pushed inside, pinning her against the rough boards. She was like honey melting over me. I tangled a hand in her hair, yanking back her head and baring her neck. I kissed her throat and loved the simple sounds she made. In the dimness her dazed expression looked saintly, and her movements were frantic, her big rear end pounding the planking, one foot hooked behind my knee. "Oh, God! I love you, Bob," she said. "I love you so much." The shovel blades were quivering in the barrel, the coils of rope were jiggling; a trowel suspended from a nail started to clank in rhythm with us. It was a cluttered act, bone-rattling and messy. Our teeth clicked together in a kiss, and my palm picked up splinters as I groped for purchase on the wall. But it was pure and urgent and the best thing that had happened to me in a long time. Callie began saying "love" every time I plunged into her as if I were dredging love up from the place it had been hiding. And she said other things, too—gushes of breath that might have been words in a strange windy language, a language whose passion made me feel twice the man I was and goaded me to drive harder into her. Then she was pushing at me, saying "Oh, God," her tone suddenly gone desperate, her expression no longer dazed, but horrorstruck, saying, "Stop it . . . stop!" and staring past my shoulder. "What is it?" I asked, trying to gentle her, but she shoved me hard and I slipped out of her. I turned, my cock waving stupidly in the air, and saw Kiri standing at the door in her black dueling clothes, her face stony with anger.

"Kiri," I said, trying to stuff myself back into my pants, feeling shame and fear and sorrow all at once.

She whirled on her heel and stalked toward the door.

"Kiri!" I stumbled after her, buttoning my pants. "Wait!"

I caught at her shoulder, spinning her half around, and before I could speak another word, she hit me three times, twice in the face, and the last—a blow delivered with the heel of her hand to the chest—taking my wind and sending me onto my back. Something black hovered over me as I lay curled on the floor, fighting to breathe, and when my vision cleared, I saw Kiri's dark face looming close.

"Can you hear me?" she asked in a voice empty as ashes.

I nodded.

"What I'm doing now," she said, "isn't because of this. It's because of who I am. You're not to blame yourself for what I do. Are you listening?"

Uncomprehending, I managed to gasp out, "Yes."

"Are you sure? What I'm going to do isn't because of you and . . . the girl." She made the "the girl" sound like "the worm" or "the rat."

"Wha . . ." I gagged, choked.

"But I will not forgive what you've done," she said, and struck me in the jaw, sending white lights shooting back through my eyes and into my skull. When I regained consciousness, she was gone.

It took me most of that night to discover that Kiri had left Edgeville, that she'd taken one of Marvin Blanks's horses and ridden out onto the flats. I knew she was gone for good. I would have ridden after her straightaway, but I didn't want to leave without telling Brad, and he was nowhere to be found. I decided I'd give him a couple of hours, and then I was going, no matter whether he had returned or not. I sat on the bed, with Callie beside me, and we waited, waited, each minute like a glass prison that lasted too long to be measured except by its weight and its silence. Callie had put on her riding clothes, and I'd quit trying to persuade her to stay behind. Her arguments were sound: it was as much her fault as mine, we were in this together, and so forth. I didn't want to go alone, anyhow. That was the main reason I'd left off arguing with her. The honorable reason, the reason I kept telling myself was the most important one, and maybe the one that had the most chance of working out to be true, of being the kind of hopeful lie that breeds a passionate truth, was that I needed to be honest with Brad about Callie, about everything that had happened, because that was the only way that any good could come of it for him, for Callie and me. Having her along was part of that honesty. To be considering all this at the time may appear self-absorbed, but I have always been a pragmatic soul, and though I cared about Kiri, I didn't expect to see her again; I knew that whenever she made a decision, she decided it to death, and by giving thought to Brad and Callie, I was hoping to salvage something of the mess I'd made. It might be that I didn't deserve anything good, but we were foolish people, not evil, and our lives were hard enough without demanding perfection of either ourselves or one another. Living on the Edge, you learned to make the best of things and not waste too much time in recriminations, and you left the indulgence of self-pity to those who could afford the luxury of being assholes.

Brad came home about an hour after first light, disheveled and sleepy-looking, his hair all stuck up in back. He stared at me, at my bruises, at Callie, and asked where his mama was.

"Let's go find her," I said. "I'll tell you what happened on the way."

He backed away from me, his pale face tightening just like Kiri's might have. "Where's she gone?"

"Listen to me, son," I said. "There'll be time later for you to get all over my butt if you want. But right now findin' your mama's what's important. I waited for you 'cause I knew you'd want to help. So let's just go now."

Callie eased back behind me as if Brad were hurting her with his stare.

"She's rode out," he said. "That it?"

I said, "Yeah."

"What'd you do?"

"Bradley," I said. "Ten seconds more, and I'm gone."

He peered at Callie and me fiercely, trying to see the rotten thing we'd done. "Hell, I reckon I don't need no explanation," he said.

I could write volumes about the first days of our ride; nothing much happened during them, but their emptiness was so profound that emptiness itself became intricate and topical, and the bleakness of the land, the frozen hardpan with its patches of dead nettles and silverweed, the mesas rising in the distance like black arks, became a commentary on our own bleakness. The mountains faded into smoky blue phantoms on the horizon, the sky was alternately bleached and clouded gray. Now and then I'd glance at Callie on my left, Brad on my right. With their dark hair flying in the wind and their grave expressions, they might have been family, and yet they never spoke a word one to the other, just maintained a remorseless concentration on the way ahead. By day we followed Kiri's sign, taking some hope from the fact that she wasn't trying to cover her tracks. Nights, we camped in the lee of boulders or a low hill, with wind ghosting from the dark side of forever, and our cooking fire the only light. Snow fell sometimes, and although most of it would melt by the time the sun was full up, what had collected in the hoofprints of the horses would last a while longer, and so in the mornings we would see a ghostly trail of white crescents leading back in the direction of home.

The first night out I let Brad vent his anger over what had happened, but it wasn't until the second night that I really talked with him about it. We were sitting watch together by the fire, our rifles beside us, and Callie was asleep beneath some blankets a few yards away, tucked between two boulders. Despite Kiri's parting gift of absolution, I took the blame for everything; but he told me that Kiri wouldn't have said what she had unless she'd meant it.

"She woulda gone ridin' sooner or later," he said. "She wanted you to know that. But that don't mean *I* forgive you."

"Whatever," I said. "But I 'spect you're liable to forgive me 'fore I forgive myself."

He just sniffed.

"I never told you I was perfect," I said. " 'Fact, ain't I always tellin' you how easy it is for men and women to screw each other up without meanin' harm to nobody? I thought you understood about all that."

'Understandin' ain't forgivin'."

"That's true enough," I said.

He shifted so that the firelight shined up one side of his face, leaving the other side in inky shadow, as if his grim expression were being eclipsed. His lips parted, and I thought he was going to say something else, but he snapped his mouth shut.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Nothin'," he said.

"Might as well spit it out."

"All right." He glared at Callie. "She shouldn't oughta be here. I mean if we find mama, she ain't gonna want to see her with us."

"That may be," I said. "But Callie's got her own needs, and she needs to be here." Brad made to speak, but I cut him off. "You know damn well if your mama don't wanna be found, we ain't gonna find her. We all hope we find her, and we're gonna try hard. But if we don't, then it's important for every one of us that we did try. You may not like Callie, but you can't deny her that."

He gave a reluctant nod, but looked to be struggling over something else.

"Don't hold back now," I said.

"I thought . . ." He turned away, probably to hide his face; there was a catch in his voice when he spoke again. "I don't understand why . . . why you and mama had to . . . why you . . ."

"I can't tell you why this happened. Shit, I never even could figure out how things got started 'tween me and your mama. The two of us together never seemed to make any damn sense. We loved each other, but I think love was something that came from need, 'stead of the other way around."

Brad jerked his thumb toward Callie. "It make more sense with her?"

"It might have, bad as that may sound to you. But now . . . now, I don't know. This all mighta killed it. Maybe that's how it should be. Anyhow, that ain't nothin' we have to deal with this minute."

The wind made a shivery moan down through the rocks, and the flames whipped sideways. Brad lowered his eyes, scooped up a handful of dust, let it sift through his fingers. "Don't guess there's any more to be said."

I let his words hang.

"I keep thinkin' 'bout mama out there," he said after a bit. "I keep seein' her like . . . like this little black dot in the middle of nowhere." He tossed dust into the fire. "Y'figure anything lives out here?"

"Just us, now." I spat into the fire, making the embers sizzle. "Maybe a tiger or two what wanders out to die."

"What 'bout Bad Men?"

"Why'd they want to be way out here? It's more likely they're livin' north of Edgeville up in the hills."

"Clay told me he'd met somebody lived out here."

"Well, Clay wasn't no big authority now, was he?"

"He wasn't no liar, neither. He said this fella come in once in awhile to buy shells. Never bought nothin' but shells. The fella told him he lived out on the flats with a buncha other men. He wouldn't say why. He told Clay if he wanted to learn why, he'd have to come lookin' for 'em."

"He's just havin' some fun with Clay."

"Clay didn't think so."

"Then he was a fool."

Brad gave me a sharp look, and I had the feeling he was seeing me new. "He ain't a fool just 'cause you say he is."

"Naw," I said. "There's a hell of a lot more reason than that, and you know it."

He made a noise of displeasure and stared into the flames. I stared at them, too, fixing on the nest of embers, a hive of living orange jewels shifting bright to dark and back again as they were fanned by the wind. The glow from the fire carved a bright hollow between the two boulders where Callie was sleeping. I would have liked to have crawled under the blankets with her and taken whatever joy I could in the midst of that wasteland; but Kiri was too much on my mind. I wished I could have limited my vision of her to a black dot; instead, I pictured her hunkered down chanting in the darkness, making her mind get slower and slower, until it grew so slow she would just sit there and die.

I straightened and found Brad looking at me. He met my eyes, and after a long moment he slumped and let his head hang; from that exchange I knew we had been thinking pretty much the same thing. I put my hand on his arm; he tensed, but didn't shrug it off as he might have the night before. I saw how worn down and tired he was.

"Go on get some sleep," I told him.

He didn't argue, and before long he was curled up under his blankets, breathing deep and regular.

I lay back, too, but I wasn't sleepy. My mind was thrumming with the same vibration that underscored the silence, as if all the barriers between my thoughts and the dark emptiness had been destroyed, and I felt so alive that it seemed I was floating up a fraction of an inch off the ground and trembling all over. A few stars were showing as pale white points through thin clouds. I tried to make them into a constellation, but couldn't come up with a shape that would fit them; they might have been the stars of my life, scattered from their familiar pattern, and I realized that even if we could find Kiri, I was never going to be able to put them back the way they had been. Life for me had been a kind of accommodation with questions that I'd been too cowardly or just too damn stupid to ask, and that was why it had been blown apart so easily. If Kiri hadn't been the victim of the piece, I thought, having it blown apart might have been a good result.

I made an effort to see what lay ahead for us. The way things stood,

however, there was no figuring it out, and my thoughts kept drifting back to Kiri. I stared off beyond the fire, letting my mind empty, listening to the wind scattering grit across the stones. At last I grew drowsy, and just before I woke Callie to stand her watch, I could have sworn I saw one of the tiny pale stars dart off eastward and then plummet toward the horizon; but I didn't think much about it at the time.

Five days out, and no sign of Kiri. Her trail had vanished like smoke in a mirror, and I did not know what to do. Five days' ride from Edgeville was considered an unofficial border between the known and unknown, and it was generally held that you would be risking everything by continuing past that limit. Nobody I'd ever met had taken up the challenge, except maybe for the man in the bubble car. We had enough supplies to keep going for a couple of more days, yet I felt we'd be wasting our time by doing so and I decided to bring the matter up that night.

We camped in a little depression among head-high boulders about fifty yards from the base of a hill that showed like a lizard's back against the stars, and as we sat around the fire, I made my speech about returning.

After I had done, Callie said with some force, "I ain't goin' back 'til we find her."

Brad made a noise of disgust. "You got nothin' to say about it," he told her. "Wasn't for you, wouldn't none of this happened."

"Don't you be gettin' on me!" she snapped. "There's a lot about all this you ain't got the brains to understand."

"I'll say whatever the hell I want," he came back.

"Both of you shut up," I said.

The fire popped and crackled; Brad and Callie sat scowling at the flames.

"We're not gonna argue about this," I said. "Everybody knows what happened, and we all got reason for being here. We started together and we're gonna finish together. Understand?"

"I understand," said Callie, and Brad muttered under his breath.

"Say it now," I told him. "Or keep it to yourself."

He shook his head. "Nothin'."

"We'll go on a couple of more days," I said after a pause. "If we ain't found her by then, there ain't gonna be no findin' her."

Brad's face worked, and once again he muttered something.

"What say?"

"Nothin'."

"Don't gimme that," I said. "Let's hear it. I don't want you pissin' and moanin' anymore. Let's get everything out in the open."

His cheekbones looked as if they were going to punch through the skin. "If you gave a damn about Mama, you wouldn't stop 'til we found her. But all you wanna do is to get back home and crawl in bed with your whore!"

He jumped to his feet. "Whyn't you just do that? Go on home! I don't need you, I'll find her myself."

A hot pressure had been building in my chest, and now it exploded. I launched myself at Brad, driving him back against one of the boulders and barring my forearm under his jaw. "You little shit!" I said. "Talk to me like that again, I'll break your goddamn neck."

He looked terrified, his eyes tearing, but all hell was loose in me and I couldn't stop yelling at him. Callie tried to pull me off him, but I shoved her aside.

"I'm sick'n tired of you remindin' me every damn minute 'bout what it is I done," I said to Brad. "I know it to the goddamn bone, y'hear? I don't need no fuckin' reminders!"

Suddenly I had a glimpse of myself bullying a thirteen-year-old. My anger drained away, replaced by shame. I let Brad go and stepped back, shaking with adrenaline. "I'm sorry," I said. But he was already sprinting off into the night and I doubt he heard me.

"He'll be back," said Callie from behind me. "It'll be all right."

I didn't want to hear that anything was all right, and I moved away from her; but she followed and pressed against my back, her arms linking around my waist. I didn't want tenderness, either; I pried her arms loose.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"What the hell you think?"

"I mean with us. I know you can't be lovin' to me with Bradley around. But it's more'n that."

"Maybe," I said. "I don't know."

I stepped away from the fire, moving off into the dark; the hardpan scrunched beneath my bootheels. The dark seemed to be pouring into my eyes. I felt that everything was hardening around me, locking me into a black mood, a black fate.

"You know what we need to do?" I said bitterly, not even looking at Callie. "We need to just keep on ridin' . . . more'n a couple of days, I mean. We should just keep ridin' and ridin' 'til that's the only thing we can do, 'til we're nothin' but bones and saddles."

I guess I figured she would object to that, promote some more optimistic viewpoint, but she said nothing, and when I looked back at her, I saw that she was sitting by the fire with her knees drawn up, holding her head in her hands.

I'd expected my mood would lift with the morning, but it did not, and the weather seconded my gloom, blowing up to near a gale, driving curtains of snow into our faces and obscuring us one from another. I rode with a scarf knotted about my face, my collar up, my eyebrows frosted. My thoughts revolved in a dismal cycle . . . less thoughts, really, than recognitions of a new thing inside me, or rather the breaking of some old

thing and the new absence that had replaced it, solid and foreboding as the shadowy granite of the hills. Something had changed in me forever. I tried to deny it, to reason with myself, saying that a flash of temper and a moment's bitterness couldn't have produced a marked effect. But then I thought that maybe the change had occurred days before, and that all my fit of temper had achieved was to clear away the last wreckage of my former self. I felt disconnected from Callie and Bradley. Emotionless and cold, colder than the snowy air. My whole life, I saw, was without coherence or structure. An aimless scattering of noises and heats and moments. Recognizing this, I felt to an extent liberated, and that puzzled me more. Maybe, I thought, this was how Bad Men really felt; maybe feeling this way was a stage in the making of a Bad Man. That notion neither cheered nor alarmed me. It had no color, no tonality. Just another icy recognition. Whenever Bradley or Callie drifted close, I saw in their faces the same hard-bitten glumness, and whenever we made eye contact, there was no flash of hatred or love or warmth. I recalled what I'd said the night before about riding until we were nothing but bones and saddles, and I wondered now if that might not have been prophetic.

Toward mid-afternoon, the wind dropped off and the snow lightened. What I'd thought were snow peaks on the horizon proved to be clouds, but rocky brown hills burst from the hardpan, leaving a narrow channel between them along which we were passing. Though there was no sign of life other than patches of silverweed, though the landscape was leached and dead, I had a sense that we were moving into a less barren part of the flats. The sky brightened to a dirty white, the sun just perceptible, a tinny glare lowering in the west. I felt tense and expectant. Once I thought I spotted something moving along the crest of a hill. A tiger, maybe. I unsheathed my rifle and kept a closer watch, but no threat materialized.

That evening we camped in a small box canyon cut about a hundred yards back into the side of the hill. I did for the horses, while Bradley and Callie made a fire, and then, with full dark still half-an-hour off, not wanting any conversation, I went for a walk to the end of the canyon, passing between limestone walls barely wider than my armspan and rising thirty and forty feet overhead. A few thorny shrubs sprouted from the cliffs, and there was an inordinate amount of rubble underfoot as if the place had experienced a quake. In certain sections, the limestone was bubbled and several shades darker than the surrounding rock, a type of formation I'd never seen before. I poked around in the rubble, unearthing a spider or two, some twigs; then, just as I was about to head back to the campsite, I caught sight of something half-buried under some loose rock, something with a smooth unnatural-looking surface. I kicked the rocks aside, picked it up. It was roughly rectangular in shape, about three inches long and two wide, and weighed only a couple of ounces; it was slight-

ly curved, covered with dust, and one edge was bubbled and dark like the limestone. I brushed away the dust, and in the ashen dusk I made out that its color was metallic gold. I turned it over. The inner surface was covered with padding.

It wasn't until a minute or so later, as I was digging through the rubble, looking for more pieces, that I put together the fragment in my hand with the golden helmet that the driver of the bubble car had worn. Even then I figured that I was leaping to a conclusion. But the next moment I uncovered something that substantiated my conclusion beyond a doubt. At first I thought it a root of some sort. A root with five withered, clawed projections. Then I realized it was a mummified hand. I straightened, suddenly anxious, suspicious of every skittering of wind, sickened by my discovery. At length I forced myself to start digging again. Before long I had uncovered most of a body. Shreds of bleached, pale red rags wrapping the desiccated flesh. Bigger fragments of the helmet. And most pertinently, a hole the size of my fist blown in the back of the skull; the edges of the bone frothed into a lace of tiny bubbles. Gingerly, I turned the body over. The neck snapped, the head broke away. I fought back the urge to puke and turned the head. Black slits of eyes sewn together by brittle eyebrows. It was the face of a thousand-year-old man. There was no exit wound in the front of the skull, which meant—as I'd assumed—that the wound could not have been made by a rifle, nor by any weapon with which I was familiar.

It's strange how I felt at that moment. I wasn't afraid, I was angry. Part of my anger was related to memories of that pitiful little man and his red car and his foolhardiness with the apes; but there was another part I didn't understand, a part that seemed to bear upon some vast injustice done me, one I could feel in my guts but couldn't name. I held onto the anger. It was the first strong thing I'd felt all day, and I needed it to sustain me. I could understand why apes danced, why tigers howled. I wanted to dance myself, to howl, to throw some violent shape or sound at the sky and kill whatever was responsible for my confusion.

I think my mind went blank for awhile; at any rate, it seemed that a long time passed before I next had a coherent thought. I didn't know what to do. My instincts told me that we should head back to Edgeville, but when I tried to settle on that course, I had the sudden suspicion that Edgeville was more dangerous than the flats, that I was well out of there. I knew I had to tell Brad and Callie, of course. Nothing would be gained by hiding this from them. I just wasn't sure what it all meant, what anything meant. My picture of the world had changed. Everything that had seemed to make sense now seemed pitiful and pointless, thrown out of kilter by the last day's ride and my discovery of the body; I couldn't see anything in my past that had been done for a reason I could understand. I was sure of one thing, however, and though knowing it was not an occa-

sion for joy, it gave me a measure of confidence to be sure of something. The flats were not empty. Something was living out there, something worse than Bad Men. And I knew we must be close to whatever it was. We might die if we were to stay, but I doubted now that it would be by starvation.

As I've said, I intended to tell Brad and Callie about the dead man, but I wasn't eager to do it. At the end of the canyon, the stone sloped up at a gentle incline, gentle enough so I could scramble up it, and after I had done this, I walked along the rim of the canyon wall until I could see the glow of our fire. I sat down, my feet dangling, and went with my thoughts, which were none of them of the happy variety. I still didn't know what course to follow, but the more I studied on it, the more I wanted to find out what had killed the man in the bubble car. It was a fool's mission. Yet I could not let go of the idea; my hold on it seemed unnaturally tenacious, as if it were something I'd waited all my life to pursue. At last I wore out on thinking and just sat there stargazing, watching a thin smoke rise from our fire.

I'm not sure when I first noticed that some of the stars were moving; I believe I registered the fact long before I began to be alarmed by it. There were three stars involved, and instead of falling or arcing across the sky, as would have been the case with meteors, they were darting in straight lines, hovering, then darting off again. What eventually alarmed me was that I realized they were coming closer, that they were following the line of the hills. And what put the fear of God into me was when one of them began to glow a pale green and from it a beam of emerald brilliance lanced down to touch the slopes and I heard a distant rumble. At that I jumped to my feet and raced along the rim of the canyon, fear a cold knot in my groin, shouting to Brad and Callie, who peered up at me in confusion.

"Get the horses!" I yelled. "Bring 'em on up here! Now!"

They exchanged concerned glances.

"What's the matter?" Brad called out.

I looked out across the flats; the three stars were getting very close.

"Now!" I shouted. "Hurry, damn it! Trouble's comin'!"

That got them moving.

By the time they reached me with the horses, I could see that the three stars weren't shaped like stars at all, but like the spearpoints the apes used: curved cylinders with a blunt tip at one end, thirty or forty feet long, with a slightly convex underside. I couldn't make out any details, but I had no desire to stick around and observe. I swung onto my horse, reined it in, and said to Bradley and Callie, " 'Member that cave we spotted up top?"

"What are they?" asked Callie, staring at the three stars.

"We'll find out later," I said. "Come on! Head for the cave!"

It was a wild ride we had, plunging up the dark slope, with the horses sliding on gravel, nearly losing their footing, but at length we made it to the cave. The entrance was just wide enough for the horses, but it widened out inside and looked to extend pretty far back into the hill. We hobbled the horses deep in the cave, and then crept back to the entrance and lay flat. A couple of hundred feet below, those three glowing things were hovering over the canyon we had just vacated. It was an eerie thing to see, the way they drifted back and forth with a unsteady, vibrating motion, as if lighter than air and being trembled by an updraft. They were bigger than I'd judged, more like sixty feet long, and the white light appeared to be flowing across their surfaces—metal surfaces, I supposed—and was full of iridescent glimmers. The light was hard to look at close up; it made your eye want to slide off it. They made a high-pitched, quivering noise, something like a flute, but reedier. That sound wriggled into my spine and raised gooseflesh on my arms.

I was more frightened than I'd been in all my life. I shivered like a horse that has scented fire and stared with my eyes strained wide until I was poured so full of that strange glittering white light, all my thoughts were drowned. Then I yanked at Callie and Brad, and hauled them after me into the cave. We scuttled back deep into the darkness and sat down. The horses snorted and shifted about; their noises gave me comfort. Brad asked what we were going to do, and I said, what did he want to do? Throw rocks at the damn things? We'd just sit tight, I said, until our company had departed. I could barely see him, even though he was a couple of feet away, but talking to him stiffened my spine some. Yet with half my mind I was praying for the things outside just to go away and leave us be. I could still hear their weird fluting, and I saw a faint white glow from the cave mouth.

Callie asked again what I thought they were. I said I reckoned they must be some sort of machines.

"I can see that," she said, exasperated. "But who you figger's flyin' 'em?"

I hadn't really had time to think about that until then, but still, it struck me as particularly stupid on my part that I hadn't already come up with the answer to her question.

"The Captains," I said. "Has to be them. Couldn't nobody else make a machine like that."

"Why'd they be chasin' us?" Brad asked.

"We don't know they are," said Callie. "They could just be after doin' their own business."

"Then why'd we run?"

I realized I hadn't told them about the dead man, and I decided that now wasn't the time—it would be too much bad news all at once.

"We did right to run," I said. "Believe me, we did right."

" 'Sides," said Callie, "we don't know for absolute sure it's the Captains. I mean what your pa says makes good sense, but we don't know for sure."

We were silent for a bit and finally Brad said, "You think mama run into them things."

I gave a sigh that in the enclosed space of the cave seemed as loud as one of the horses blowing out its breath. "I was watchin' 'em for a long time 'fore I hollered," I said. "From the way they're patrollin' the hills, I figger that's possible."

There followed another silence, and then he said, "Maybe after they gone, maybe we should try trackin' 'em."

I was about to say that we'd be doing good just to get shut of them, when the cave mouth was filled with an emerald flash, and I was flung back head over heels, and the next thing I knew I was lying in pitch-darkness with dirt and stone chips in my mouth, and my ears ringing. Some time later I felt Brad's hands on my chest, heard him say, "Dad?" Then I heard the horses whinnying, their hooves clattering as they tried break free of their hobbles. I wanted to sit up but was too woozy.

"Callie," I said.

"She's gone to see if there's a way out."

"Wha . . ." I broke off and spat dirt.

"The entrance is blocked. Must be a ton of rock come down over it."

"Shit!" I said, touching the back of my head; there was a lump coming. Patches of shiny blackness swam before my eyes. "The horses awright?"

"Just scared."

"Yeah," I said. "Me, too."

I sat up cautiously, groped for Brad, found his shoulder and gave it a squeeze. I couldn't think; I was so numb that I only felt the first trickles of fear. It was as if the explosion was still taking place in my skull, a dark cloud of smoke and splintered rock boiling up and whirling away the last of my good sense.

Seconds later Callie's voice called from a distance, telling us to come ahead, she'd found something.

Still dizzy, I let Brad take the lead, going in a crouch deeper into the hill, and after a minute I saw stars and a ragged oval of blue-dark sky.

Callie's voice came again, issuing from beyond the opening. "See it?"

"Almost there!" I told her.

The opening was set about six feet up in the wall, not too high and easily wide enough for a man to pass through, but no horse was ever going to leave the cave that way. Without the horses, I thought, we might as well have died in the explosion. However, when I pulled myself out into the chill air beside Callie and saw what she had found, I forgot all about our plight.

On this side of the hill, too, the hardpan flowed off toward the horizon. But there was one distinct difference. Below us, its rim no more than a

few hundred yards from the base of the hill, lay a large crater, roughly circular and perhaps a mile in diameter, like a bowl brimful of golden light. Light so brilliant it obscured all but the deepest cuts and bulges in the crater's rock walls. It resembled a glowing golden sore on a cracked, stretched-tight hide. The three flying machines were flitting back and forth above it with the agitation of mites swarming above a dead squirrel, and as we watched they descended into the crater, vanishing beneath the rim. After they had gone out of view, none of us moved or said a thing. I can't speak for Brad or Callie, but for my part, though I'd already had my basic notion of how the world worked shaken considerable, the sight of the crater completely shattered all my old conceptions. Maybe it was simply the size of the thing that affected me. . . . the size and the upward pour of light. Maybe all the little wrong bits that had come before had had the irritating effect of putting a few sand grains in my boots, and now this, this immense wrongness, had scraped the skin off my soles and left me unable to walk or do anything other than reckon with shock and bewilderment. Even a half hour earlier, I might—if asked—have given a fair approximation of where I stood. With my son and my lover, six days out on the Flats from Edgeville, I would have said. In the heart of the wasteland where once the old world flourished, countless centuries after the disaster that ended it. I would have thought this a fine answer, and I would have been certain of my place and purpose. Now I felt I was in the company of strangers, in the midst of a great darkness with light below, a barren place of unrelieved abstraction that offered no clue as to its nature. Perhaps the depth of my reaction seems unreasonable. After all, we had long supposed that the Captains must have flying machines, and though I had never seen one, I shouldn't have been so thoroughly disconcerted by the sight. And I had seen craters before, albeit never one this big. But it was as if all the tidy structures of my life had been abolished, all rules of logic broken, and I could not come up with a new picture of the world that would fit inside my head. I realize now that this breakdown had been a long time coming, that what had provoked it had been working on me for days; but at the time it seemed sudden, catastrophic, totally disorienting.

It was Callie who broke the silence, saying we had to go down to the crater, we had no other choice. I am not clear how I responded; I recall saying something about the horses, about how even if we went down, we'd have to come back and shoot them, we couldn't leave them to die of thirst. There was a little more conversation, but I cannot recall it. Eventually we began picking our way down the slope, glancing up now and again to see that the crater had swelled and grown brighter, a vast golden pit into which we were preparing to descend.

We were, I'd estimate, about fifty feet from the base of the hill when a woman's voice hailed us from the darkness and ordered us to drop our ri-

fles. I was so bewildered and startled, I obeyed without hesitation. I guess it seemed right given the circumstance that voices should issue from the dark and command us. I heard footsteps crunching nearby, caught sight of shadowy figures moving toward us through the rocks. Lots of them. Maybe thirty, maybe more. They assembled about us, some gaining detail against the nimbus of light shining up from the crater behind them, yet most of them remaining shadows, looking evil as crows in their slouch hats and long coats.

"Just who are you people?" asked another voice, this one a man's, deeper than the woman's, but softer and oddly familiar.

We gave our names, said we were from Edgeville.

"Bob Hillyard," said the voice musingly. "I'll be damned."

"That's his boy with him," said someone else. "And that girl there works for ol' Fornoff."

"Just who in creation are you?" I asked, not wanting to let on how intimidated I was—I knew we had fallen in with Bad Men. I should have felt more afraid than I did, but I was still so confused, so daunted by the overall situation, the threat these men presented did not seem of moment.

"You know some of us," said still another voice. " 'Leastways, I bet you know me."

A match flared, caught on a twist of something in one of the figure's hands, and as he moved nearer, holding the torch so that it shined up onto his face, making ghoulish shadows under the eyes, I saw it was Clay Fornoff. Heavier; chin covered with pale stubble; wearier-looking. But still with that petulant sneer stamped onto his face.

"Wasn't for this man here, I'd never have taken the ride," he said.

" 'Spect you owe him one, don'tcha, Clay?" said somebody.

"You know I didn't have no choice," I told him.

"Don't matter," he said. "Turns out you did me a favor. But you didn't have that in mind, didja now? You was just runnin' me off to die."

A huge shadow moved up beside Clay and nudged him aside.

"You got a score to settle," he said to Clay in that soft voice, "deal with it later." He moved full into the light of the torch, and I saw what I'd begun to suspect seconds before: it was Wall. A monstrous slab of a man with owl-tufted brows, a shaggy graying beard, thick lips and a bulging forehead, his face as expressionless as an idol's. A waterfall of dark hair spilled from under his hat to his shoulders.

"Goddamn, Bob," he said to me. "Man shoots as poorly as you got no business this far out on the flats."

I'd always admired Wall, and that his most salient memory of me was my poor shooting eye made me feel stupid and childlike. Kind of like being dressed down by your boyhood hero.

"Ain't like I wanna be here," I said. "Just had somethin' needed doin'."

Wall studied Callie and Brad, who were gawping at him, apparently overwhelmed by the sight of this enormous man.

"Feelin' confused, are ye?" he said with mild good humor, as if he were talking to children. "Seem like even simple things like right and left ain't what they used to be?"

That struck me as odd, that he would offer such an accurate analysis of my mental condition and do it so casually, as if how I felt was something usual, something any fool could have predicted.

"What the hell you know about it?" I asked him.

"Hits ever'body the same," he said. "The conditionin' starts breakin' down 'bout five days out. Time a man gets this far, he's usually got more questions in him than answers. Y'see"—he coughed, spat up a hocker and aimed it off to his right—"it ain't only doctorin' you get at the hospitals. The Captains condition you to be happy with your lot. It's sorta like hypnotizin' ye. Takes a mighty strong reason for a man to break down the conditionin'. Seems powerful emotion's 'bout the only cure." He cocked his head, gave me a searching look. "What brings ye here?"

"My wife Kiri," I said, still trying to absorb what he had told us. "She lost a duel and come out here to die."

"Kiri," said Wall. "I remember her. She was a good fighter."

Bradley piped up, "We figger she's down in that hole."

Wall's eyes flicked toward him. "She might be at that."

From the cautious flatness of his tone, I had the impression that if Kiri was down in the crater, it wasn't likely we were going to see her again.

"I don't get it," I said, and began talking fast to blot out the pictures I was conjuring of Kiri's fate. "What the hell's goin' on? What're the Captains doin' by givin' us this here conditionin'? How come . . ."

"Slow down there, man," Wall said, and put a hand on my shoulder; I was shocked into silence by the weight and solidity of it. "I ain't got time just now to be givin' a history lesson. Truth is, I don't know if I got much to teach ye, anyway. Far as we can prove, things're 'bout the way the Captains say they was. Though I got a suspicion that the folks who survived the bad time wasn't given a choice 'bout how they wanted to live, they was just put where the Captains wanted 'em and conditioned to accept it. But there's a coupla things different for certain sure. One is, they ain't our friends, they just playin' with us, tormentin' us. Hell, might be they could kill us all in a flash, they had a mind. But even if that's so, it'd ruin their game. So our job is to be dangerous for 'em, kill a few here and there, give 'em trouble. They enjoy that kinda trouble. Our aim is to get strong without 'em realizin' it, so the day'll come when we're strong enough to finish 'em. And that day ain't far off. But you got time to learn all 'bout that. What you need to unnerstan' is"—he spat again—"you're Bad Men now. You may not unnerstan' it this minute, but ye can't go back now your conditionin's broke. Ain't nothin' for ye back there. Your

life is here now, and you gotta make the best of it. That means you're with us in ever'thing we do. We make a raid for supplies on Edgeville, you're part of it. There ain't no middle ground."

"If things is like you say," Callie asked, "whyn't you just tell it to the people back in Edgeville or Windbroken . . . or wherever?"

"Someday maybe we will. But the way things is now, buncha Bad Men waltz into town and start goin' on 'bout how the Captains is enemies of mankind . . . Shit! How you think that'd set? Think they'd believe us? Naw, you gotta ride out way past gone onto the flats 'fore you can hear the truth when it's told ye. But after you take that ride, you don't need to hear it more'n once." He sucked on a tooth, making a smacking noise. "Anyways, there's plenty of Bad Men ain't been brought into the fold. That's somepin' we need to take care of first, 'fore we go bringin' the word to Edgeville."

We stood there wrapped in the weighty stuff of all he had said. The desolation his words implied had slotted into a ready-made place inside my brain—it seemed something I had always known. But the fact that I was now a Bad Man, that was almost impossible to believe. The longer I had to digest what Wall had told us, the less like a Bad Man I felt. I had the sense we were stranded at the bottom of an empty well, and far above, invisible against the black circle of sky, strange, cruel faces were peering down at us, deciding which ones to pluck up and gut. I felt more abandoned than afraid: I could not have felt more so had I woken up to find myself naked and alone in the middle of nowhere. If it had been left to me I would have sat down there on a rock and stayed sitting until I had gotten a better handle on how things were, but Bradley grabbed my arm and said, "We gotta go down there. We gotta find Mama."

"Not tonight, boy," Wall said. "You try goin' down there tonight, you'd last 'bout as long as spit on a griddle. We'll be goin' down tomorrow night. We'll have a look 'round for her."

"I'm goin' with you," said Bradley.

"Listen, little man," Wall told him; despite its softness, his voice was so resonant, it might have issued from a cave. "You do what you told from now on. This ain't no fine time we're havin' here. This is desperate business. I admire you stickin' by your mama, I swear I do. And maybe we can help her. But ain't nobody gettin' in the way of what's gotta be done tomorrow night, so you might as well get used to it."

Bradley stood his ground but said nothing. After a second Clay Fornoff handed his torch to another man and came up beside Brad and slung an arm around his shoulder. "C'mon, kid," he said. "We'll getcha somethin' to eat."

I didn't much like Clay taking him under his wing, but I knew Brad didn't want to be with me, so I let them go off into the darkness without a squawk.

Wall moved a couple of steps closer; despite the cold, I smelled his gamey odor. Beneath those owlish brows, his eyes were aglow with fierce red light from the torch. Generally I've found that people you haven't seen in a while shrink some from the image you hold of them in your mind. But not Wall. With that golden glare streaming up from the crater behind him, he still looked more monument than man. "Where'd you stake your horses at?" he asked.

I told him.

"Shitfire!" He slapped his hand against his thigh. Then he spoke to another man, instructing him to take a party up to the cave and see what could be done. When he turned back to me he let out a chuckle; he was missing a front tooth, and the gap was about the same size as the first joint of my thumb. "Perk up there, Bob," he said. "You look like you 'spectin' the devil to fly down your chimney. Believe me, you a damn sight better off'n you was 'fore you run into us."

I had no doubt this was the truth, but it didn't much gladden me to hear it.

"This your woman?" Wall asked me, jerking a thumb toward Callie.

Callie's eyes met mine, then ducked away, locking on the ground. I got something more than fear from that exchange, but I was too weary to want to understand what.

"Yeah," she said, beating me to it by a hair.

"We'll fix ya up with some blankets directly." Wall heaved a sigh and stared off toward the crater. "I'm mighty glad to see you out here, Bob. We been needin' more people to work in the gardens."

"Gardens?" I said dully.

"That's right. As I recall you had yourself some fine-looking tomatoes back in Edgeville."

"You growin' things out here?" I asked. "Where?"

"Somebody'll fill you in 'bout all that. Maybe in the mornin'." Wall took off his hat and did some reshaping of the brim, then jammed it back on. "Meantime you get some food in ye and try to sleep. Gonna be a big night tomorrow. Big night for ever'body in the whole damn world."

After we had been fed on jerky and dried fruit, Callie and I settled down in a nest made by three boulders a ways apart from the others. We spread a couple of blankets and pulled the rest up to our chins, sitting with our backs against one of the boulders, our hips and legs touching. Once I glanced over at her. Light from the crater outlined her profile and showed something of her grave expression. I had the idea she felt my eyes on her, but she gave no sign of noticing, so I tried to do as Wall suggested and sleep. Sleep would not come, however. I couldn't stop wondering what we had fallen into. Seeing so many Bad Men this far out, Wall's talk of gardens, the fact they planned a raid or something like against the

Captains—all that spoke to a complexity of life out here on the flats that I couldn't fathom. And I thought, too, about what Wall had told us about "conditioning." Strange as the idea seemed, it made sense. How else could you explain why people would be so stupid and docile as to swallow such swill as we had about our ancestors choosing a pitiful, hard-scrabble existence over a life of ease?

There was no use in studying on any of this, I realized; sooner or later I'd learn whatever there was to learn. But my mind kept on worrying at this or that item, and I knew I wasn't going to get any sleep.

Then Callie said, "I thought it had all gone, y'know. I thought all the bad times had wiped it away. But that ain't so. Everything's still there."

Her face was turned toward me, too shadowed to read.

When she had spoken I hadn't understood what she meant, but now I knew she had been talking about the two of us.

"I guess I wanna hear how it is with you," she said.

"I ain't been thinkin' about it," I told her. "I ain't had the time."

"Well, you got the time right now."

I didn't feel much like exercising my brain, but when I tried to think how I felt, it all came clear with hardly any effort. It was as if I were looking down a tunnel that ran through time from the crater to Edgeville, and I saw Kiri riding the flats alone, I saw the hurt on Brad's face, I saw myself, and I saw Callie with rime on her hat brim and a stony expression, and then those images faded, and what I was looking at, it seemed, wasn't memory but truth, not the truth I believed, because that was just like everything else in my life, a kind of accommodation. No, this truth I was seeing was the truth behind that, the underpinnings of my existence, and I realized that the things I'd thought I felt for Callie were only things I'd wanted to feel, things I'd talked myself into feeling, but that was the way the brain worked, you bought into something and more often than not it came true without your noticing, and so, while I hadn't loved Callie—not like I thought I had, anyhow—sometime between all the trouble with Kiri and the end of our ride I had come to love her exactly like that, and I was always going to be ahead of myself in that fashion. I was always going to be wanting and hoping for and believing in things because they were what I thought I should want or hope for or believe . . . except now, because some trick of conditioning the Captains had played on me had worn off, right this minute, maybe for the first time ever, I had caught up with myself and could see exactly what I had become and what I believed in and what I loved. And there was Brad. And there was Callie. Beneath the flirty, pretty package, she was strong and flawed and sweet and needy, just like us all. But strong was most important. Strong was what I hadn't known about her. The strength it had taken for her, a girl from Windbroken who would dread the flats worse by far than any Edger, who had grown up fat and sassy in a softer world. The strength

she'd had to summon to ride out into that world of less-than-death, and the reasons she had done it, for honor, for love of me and for the thing she didn't understand that made strength possible.

And Kiri was there, too, but different.

Like a picture hung in an old cobwebby room both of us had vacated years ago. Whatever lie we had believed into truth had been dead a long time, and Kiri had done what she had because of how she was, not because of how I was or how she was to me. Recognizing that didn't make me feel any better, but at least all that old fire and smoke didn't prevent me from seeing what was of consequence now. I'd known all this for months, but I felt stupid for not having been able to accept any of it before, and I couldn't think of what to say, and all I managed was to repeat what Callie had said, telling her that everything was still there for me, too.

She moved into me a bit, and I put an arm around her, and then she let her head rest on my shoulder, and we sat that way for a few minutes—we were both, I suspect, feeling a little awkward, a little new to one another. Callie stretched herself and snuggled into me. Despite everything, despite fear and hard riding and all that had happened, having her there under my blanket gave me some confidence.

"You all right?" I asked her.

She said, "Just fine," then let out a dusty laugh.

"What's so funny?" I asked.

"I was goin' to say I wished we was home, but then I thought twice about it. Edgeville don't seem like home no more."

"Just a little of it would be all right," I said. "Maybe a wood stove and some kindling."

She made a noise of agreement and then fell silent. Big cold stars were dancing in the faraway black wild of the sky, so bright they looked to be shifting around like the ships the Captains flew, but I saw no fearful thing in them, only their glitter and the great identities they sketched in fire, the lady on the throne, the old hunter with his gemmy belt. What was it like, I wondered, to live among them, to be small and secretive with purple eyes. To be daunted by life and play with men and women as if they were dolls full of blood. Wall would probably understand them, I thought. For all his homespun ways, I had the notion he was as different from me as any Captain.

"And a bed," Callie said out of the blue.

"Huh?"

"I was thinkin' a bed would be nice, too."

"Oh, yeah," I said. "Yeah, that'd be good." Then thinking she might have been hinting at something, I added, "I gotta tell ya, I ain't feelin' much like doin' anything tonight."

She picked herself up, gave me a look and laughed. "I swear you must

think you're the greatest damn thing since vanilla ice cream. I'm so wore down, I doubt I could sit up straight let alone"—she sniffed—"do anything."

"I was only saying it in case you were . . ."

"Just shut up, Bob!"

She settled back down next to me. I couldn't tell for certain, but I didn't believe she was really angry. After a couple of minutes she laid her head on my shoulder again, and a few seconds after that she took my hand beneath the blankets and put it up under her shirt. The warmth of her breast seemed to spread from my palm all through me, and its softness nearly caused me to faint. The feeling that held in my mind then had just a shade of lustfulness; most of what I felt was tender, trusted, loved. A feeling like that couldn't last for too long, not in that place, not at that moment, but for the time it did, it made the golden light spilling upward from the crater a fine place to rest my eyes, and pulled the starry void close around me like a good blanket, and spoke to me of something I could catch on my tongue and cradle in my hand and crush against my skin, but that I could have never put a name to.

Mornings, Kiri told me once, were lies. It was only the nights that were true. She meant a sad, desolate thing by this, she meant that the brightness of things is illusion, and the blackness of them is where the truth would fit if we had courage enough to admit it. Yet when I thought of those words now, they meant something completely opposite, because the virtues she applied to night and morning had been all switched around for me.

At any rate, in the gray, blustery morning following that brilliant night, with big flakes falling from the sky, Wall sent his second-in-command, a man named Coley, to fill us in. Coley was a tense sort, a little yappy dog to Wall's big placid one, scrawny and worried-looking, with a grizzled beard and sunken cheeks and a startling bit of color to his outfit, a bright-red ribbon for a hat band. Though his anxious manner unnerved me—he was always fidgeting, glancing around as if concerned he might be caught at something—I related to him a damn sight better than I did Wall, mostly because Coley did not seem so all-fired sure of himself.

He told us they'd been planning this raid for years, and that the purpose of it was to steal a flying machine. A few years back one of the machines had crashed out on the flats; they had captured the sole survivor, whom they called Junior, and forced him to supply information about all manner of things; he was to be the pilot of the stolen machine once Wall's people succeeded in breaking into it. Problem was, the minute they started messing with it, there was a chance that an alarm would be sounded, and we might have to fight off the Captains for as long as it took to finish the job. Maybe an hour, maybe more. There were, according to Coley,

nearly five hundred men and women scattered about in the rocks, laying low, and he wasn't sure even that many would be enough to keep the Captains off, though Wall was of the opinion that our casualties would be light. Coley did not agree.

"It ain't the Captains worry me," he said. "It's who they got doin' their fightin' for 'em. Chance's are there'll be apes. Might even be some of our own people. They got ways of makin' a man do things against his will."

"What I don't get," Brad said, "is how you make this here Captain do what you want. Every time I talk to 'em, I get the feelin' things don't go how they like 'em, they're liable to keel over and die."

"That ain't quite the way of it," Coley told him. "They just don't think they can die is all. 'Cordin' to Junior, they make copies of themselves. Clones, he calls 'em. One dies, there's another waitin' to take his place who's got the same memories, same everything." He shook his head in wonderment. "Damndest thing I ever heard of. Anyhow, they got these collars. Metal collars that fit back of the neck and the head. I don't know how it works. But slap one on somebody, and they get downright suggestible. We picked some up from the crash, and we used one on Junior."

We all three nodded and said, "Huh" or something similar, as if we understood, but I doubt Brad or Callie understood Coley any better than I did.

A shout came from a man downslope, and Coley turned to it; but the shout must have been directed at someone else. The crater walls looked ashen, and the whole thing seemed more fearsome now than it had with light streaming up from it. Under the clouded sky the hardpan was a dirty yellow, like old bones.

"What is this place?" I asked. "What the hell are they doin' down there?"

"The Captains call it the Garden," Coley said. "Sometimes they use it for fightin'. Junior says they're all divided into clans up on the stations, and this here's where they settle clan disputes. Other times they use it for parties, and that's probably what's goin' on now. If it was a fight there'd be more ships. They like to watch fightin'." He worked up a good spit and let it fly. "That's how come they treasure us so much. They enjoy the way we fight."

I let that sink in for a few seconds, thinking about Kiri fitted with a collar. A break appeared in the clouds, and Coley peered up into the sky, looking more worried than ever. When I asked him what was wrong, he said, "I'm just hopin' the weather holds. We usually don't put so many people at risk. Then if the Captains drop a net, we don't get hurt so bad." He let out an long unsteady breath. " 'Course even if the weather does clear, chances are they ain't lookin' this way. They're pretty careless as regards security, and they ain't very well armed. Not like you might expect, anyway. They didn't have many personal weapons up in the or-

bitals, and we don't believe they've collected any weapons from the shelters. Why would they bother? They don't think we can hurt them. All they've got are their ships, which are armed with mining lasers. And even if they did collect weapons from the shelters, they probably wouldn't know how to use 'em. They used to be technical, but they've forgotten most of what they know. Eventually I figger their ships'll break down, and they'll be stranded up there."

Callie asked what he meant by "shelters," and he told us that they were underground places where people had slept away the centuries, waiting for the Captains to wake them once things on the surface were back to something approaching normal. It was in those places that the Bad Men lived. Places fortified now against attack from the sky. But it was clear to me that neither Coley's faith in those fortifications nor in the raid was absolute. Though I didn't know him, I had the impression that his anxiety was abnormal, at least in its intensity, and when I tried to talk with him about Wall, I detected disapproval.

"He's brought people together," he said. "He's done a lot of good things." But I could tell his heart wasn't in the words.

Sleet began coming down, just spits of it, but enough so I could hear it hissing against the rocks.

"What's all this about?" I asked Coley; I gestured at the crater. "All this business here. I know you said it was to get a ship. But why bother if . . ."

"It's about killin'," said Wall's voice behind me; he was leaning up against a boulder, looking down at us in that glum, challenging way of his; his long hair lifted in the wind. " 'Bout them killin' us all these years," he went on. "And now us evenin' things up a touch. 'Bout finding some new thing that'll let us kill even more of 'em."

"I realize that," I said. "But why not let well enough alone? Accordin' to what Coley says, we leave 'em be, sooner or later they ain't gonna be a problem."

"Is that what Mister Coley says?" Wall pinned him with a cold glare, but Coley didn't flinch from it; he made a gruff noise in his throat and turned back to me. "Y'see Coley's out here with us, don't ye? Don't that tell ye somethin'? He may believe what he told ye, but he ain't countin' on it to be true. He'd be crazy to count on it. S'pose they got more weapons than he figgers? Even if they don't, who knows what's in their minds? They might up and decide they're tired of games and kill us all. Nosir! Killin's the only way to deal with 'em."

"Ain't you worried they gonna strike back at you?" Callie asked him.

"Let 'em try! They might can pick off a few of us when we're out on the flats, but we're dug in too deep for them to do any real damage."

"That's what you believe," I said. "But then you'd be crazy to count on it bein' true, wouldn't you?"

He tried the same stare on me that he'd tried on Coley, but for some

reason I wasn't cowed by either it or his faulty logic. Coley, I noticed, seemed pleased by what I'd said.

"S'pose they got more weapons than what you figger?" I went on. "S'pose they got some'll dig you outta your holes? They might decide to kill us all. Who knows what they got in their minds?"

Wall gave a laugh. "You a clever talker, Bob, I'll hand you that. But ain't no point you goin' on like this. It's all been talked through and decided."

"How 'bout everyone back on the Edge?" Callie asked. "And Windbroken? And everywhere else? You talked it through with them, have you?"

"They ain't involved with us. Anyhow, the Captains got no reason to go hurtin' them for somethin' we done."

"No reason *you* know of, maybe," Callie said.

"Well," said Wall after a bit, looking off into the distance, "this is a real nice chat we're havin', but like I told ye, it comes a little late in the game. We'll be going down into the Garden at dusk." He cut his eyes toward me. "You come along with me if you want, Bob, and have a look for Kiri. But keep in mind she's not the main reason you're goin' to be there. Keepin' the Captains back from the ship is. That clear?"

Brad started to speak, but Wall cut him short.

"The boy and the woman can stay with the ship. We can use another coupla rifles case any of 'em break through."

I thought Brad was going to say something, but he just lowered his head; I guess he was wise enough to realize that Wall couldn't be swayed by argument.

"Keep your chin up," Wall told him. "Time'll come soon enough for ye to do some real killin'."

The three of us spent the remainder of the afternoon huddled among the rocks. We talked some, more than we had recently at any rate, but it was for the most part anxious talk designed to stop us from fretting over what lay ahead, and never touched on the things we needed to talk about. Snow fell steadily, capping the boulders in white, and as the sky darkened, golden light began to stream up from the crater once again. Then, as dusk began to accumulate, I caught sight of Coley and a couple of others leading a diminutive pale figure down the slope. It was a Captain, all right, but like none I'd seen before. Dressed in rags; emaciated; scarred. As they drew near, I got to my feet—we all did—fascinated by the proximity of this creature whom I had previously thought of in almost godlike terms. There was nothing godlike about him now. His nose was broken, squashed nearly flat, and his scalp was crisscrossed by ridged scars; one of his eyes was covered by a patch, and his other had a listless cast. The only qualities he retained similar to those curious entities I had spoken to in Edgeville were his pallor and his size. About his neck and

cupping the back of his skull was a metal apparatus worked with intricate designs resembling those I'd seen on antique silver; its richness was incongruous in contrast to his sorry state. I had expected I might feel hatred on seeing him, or something allied, but I felt nothing apart from a dry curiosity; yet after he had passed I realized that my hands were shaking and my legs weak, as if strong emotion had occupied me without my knowing and left only these symptoms, and I stood there, as did Brad and Callie, watching until the Captain—Junior—had been reduced by distance to a tiny shadow crossing the hardpan toward the crater.

It was not long afterward that Wall came to collect me. Callie and Brad went off with a big, broad-beamed woman who reminded me some of Hazel Aldred, and Wall led me over to a group of men and women who were sitting and squatting at the edge of the hardpan, and gave me over to the care of a woman named Maddy, who fitted me out with a hunting knife and a pistol and an ammunition belt. She was on the stringy side, was Maddy, with dirty blonde hair tied back in a ponytail; but she had a pretty face made interesting and more than a little sexy by the lines left by hard weather and hard living, and she had a directness and good humor that put me somewhat at ease.

"I know a red-blooded sort like you's all bucked up and rarin' to go," she said, flashing a quick grin, "but you keep it holstered till I give you the word, y'hear?"

"I'll do my level best," I told her.

"We'll be goin' down soon," she said. "If there's an attack and things get confused, stick with me and chances are you'll be fine. We believe there's gonna be some of our own people down there. They'll be collared, and like as not they'll be comin' after us. If you gotta kill 'em, nobody's goin' to blame you for it. But if you can, aim at their legs. Maybe we can save one or two."

I nodded, looked out between boulders across the hardpan. A handful of Bad Men were visible as silhouettes at the rim of the crater, black stick figures blurred against the pour of golden light; I couldn't make out what they were doing. The thought of descending into that infernal light tuned my nerves a notch higher; I couldn't have worked up a spit even if the price of spit had suddenly gone sky-high.

"Ain't no point my tellin' you not to be afraid." Maddy said. "I 'spect we're all afraid. But once we get down to business, you'll be all right."

"You sure 'bout that?" I said, trying to make it sound light; but I heard a quaver in my voice.

"You come all this way from the Edge, I guess I ain't worried 'bout you seizin' up on me."

"How 'bout Wall? You reckon he's afraid?"

She made a noncommittal noise and glanced down at her hands; with her head lowered, a wisp of hair dangling down over her forehead, her ex-

pression contemplative, the crater light glowing on her face, eroding some of the lines there, I could see the girl she once had been.

"Probably not," she said. "He likes this kind of thing."

There was disapproval in her voice. This was the second time I'd detected a less than favorable feeling toward Wall, and I was about to see if I could learn where it came from, when Clay Fornoff hunkered down beside us.

"He all set?" he asked Maddy.

She said, "Yes." Then, following a pause, she asked how much longer before we started.

"Any minute now," Fornoff said.

I didn't really have anything to say, but I thought talking might ease my anxiety, and I asked him what sort of opposition we'd be facing aside from people wearing collars.

"What's the matter, Bob?" He made a sneering noise out of my name. " 'Fraid you gonna wet yourself?"

"I was just makin' conversation."

"You wanna be friends, is that it?"

"I don't much care about that one way or another," I said.

His face tightened. "Just shut the hell up! I don't wanna hear another damn word from ya."

"Sure thing. I understand. I s'pose you don't want to hear nothin' 'bout your folks either, do ya?"

He let a few beats go by then said, "How they doin'?" But he kept his eyes trained on the crater.

I told him about his folks, his father's rheumatism, about the store and some of his old friends. When I had done he gave no sign that he had been in any way affected by the news from home. Maddy rolled her eyes and shot me an afflicted smile, as if to suggest that I wasn't the only one who considered Fornoff a pain in the ass. I'd been coming around 180 degrees in my attitude toward Bad Men, thinking of them more as heroes, rebels, and so forth; but now I told myself that some Bad Men were likely every bit as rotten as what I'd once supposed. Or maybe it was just that I was part of a time with which Fornoff would never be able to reach an accommodation; he would never be able to see me without recalling the night when he had gone Bad, and thus he would always react to me with loathing that might have better been directed at himself.

Not long afterward I heard a shout, and before I could prepare myself, I was jogging alongside Maddy and Fornoff toward the crater, watching the chute of golden light jolt sideways with every step; a couple of minutes later I found myself in the company of several hundred others descending the crater wall on ropes. The three ships rested at the bottom of the crater on a smooth plastic floor, from beneath which arose the golden light. We paused beside one of them as Wall, with the help of two other

men, worked feverishly at the smallest of the mining lasers that protruded from the prow. I saw that it was a modular unit that could be snapped into place. Once they had removed it, Wall shrugged out of his coat and lashed the unit to his right arm with a complex arrangement of leather straps; the way it fitted, his fingers could reach a panel of studs set into the bottom, and I realized it must have been designed to be portable. Wall pressed a stud and a beam of ruby light scored a deep gouge in the rock face. On seeing this he laughed uproariously, and swung the thing, which must have weighed 70 or 80 pounds, in a celebratory circle above his head.

Beyond the ships, at the bottom of a gently declining ramp, lay the entrance to a vast circular chamber—I guessed it to be about a half-mile across—floored with exotic vegetation, some of the plants having striped stalks and huge rubbery leaves, unlike anything I'd ever seen; the domed ceiling was aglow with ultraviolet panels, the same sort of light I used to grow my peas and beans and tomatoes back in Edgeville, and the foliage was so dense that the four narrow paths leading away into it were entirely overgrown. Mists curled above the treetops, rising in wraithlike coils to the top of the ceiling, lending the space a primitive aspect like some long ago jungle, daunting in its silence and strangeness.

And yet the place was familiar.

I couldn't quite figure why at first; then I recalled that Wall had said the Captains called the crater the Garden, and I thought of the book I'd read and reread back in the hydroponics building, *The Black Garden*, and the illustrations it contained—this chamber was either the model for one of those illustrations or an exact copy of the model. Confused and frightened already, I can't begin to tell you the alarm this caused me. Added to everything that I previously had not understood but had managed to arrange in a makeshift frame of reference, this last incomprehensible thing, with its disturbing echoes of decadence, now succeeded in toppling that shaky structure, and I felt as unsteady in my knowledge of what was as I had during our ride from Edgeville. I had an urge to tell someone about my sudden recognition, but then I realized that thanks to Junior, they must know far more than I did about the Garden, and of course damn near everybody knew about the book. But none of these rationalizations served to calm me, and I got to thinking what it meant that the Captains would give us these clues about their existence, what it said about their natures.

Approximately a hundred of us headed down each of the avenues, moving quietly, but at a good pace. Maddy, Clay Fornoff, and I were attached to a party led by Wall. Once beneath the canopy we were immersed in a green twilight; sweetish scents reminiscent of decay, but spicier, issued from the foliage and a humming sound rose from the polished stones beneath our feet—that sound, apart from the soft fall of our

footsteps—was the only break in the silence. No rustlings or slitherings, no leaves sliding together. Every now and then we came to a section of the path where the stones had been replaced by a sheet of transparent paneling through which we could see down into a black space picked out here and there by golden lights, and once again I was reminded of *The Black Garden*, of what the book had related about a region of black foliage and secret rooms. Once we walked beneath a crystalline bubble the size of a small room suspended in the branches, furnished with cushions, and with a broad smear of what appeared to be dried blood marring its interior surface. Far too much blood to be the sign of anything other than a death. The sight harrowed me, and Maddy, after a quick glance at the bubble, fixed her eyes on the path and did not lift them again until it was well behind us.

No more than fifty yards after we had passed beneath the bubble, we encountered the first of two side paths—the second lay barely another twenty-five yards farther along—and at each of these junctions we left a quarter of our number, who hid among the ferns that lined the way. I expected to be left with them, but I imagine Wall wanted to give me the best possible chance of locating Kiri, and though uneasy with the fact that I was moving deeper and deeper into this oppressive place, I was at the same time grateful for the opportunity. After about fifteen minutes we reached the far side of the chamber, a place where the path planed away into a well-lit tunnel that led downward at a precipitous angle. We proceeded along it until we came to another chamber, smaller than the first yet still quite large, perhaps a hundred yards in diameter, its walls covered with white shiny tiles, each bearing a red hieroglyph, and dominated by a grotesque fountain ringed by benches and banks of tree ferns, whose centerpiece, the life-sized statue of a naked crouching woman with her mouth stretched open in anguish, bled red water from a dozen gashes carved in the grayish white stone of her flesh. The statue was so real-looking, I could have sworn it was an actual person who had been magicked into stone. Vines with serrated leaves climbed the walls and intertwined across the white tray of ultraviolet light that occupied the ceiling, casting spindly shadows.

On first glance I'd assumed the chamber to be untouched by age, but then I began to notice worn edges on the benches, corners missing from tiles, a chipped knuckle on the statue, and other such imperfections. The idea that the place was old made it seem even more horrid, speaking to a tradition of the perverse, and the longer I looked at the statue, the more certain I became that it had been rendered from life; there was too much detail to the face and the body, details such as scars and lines and the like, to make me think otherwise. I imagined the woman posing for some pallid little monster, growing weaker and weaker from her wounds, yet forced by some terrifying presence, some binding torment, to maintain

her pose, and the anger that I had not been able to feel on seeing Junior now surfaced in me and swept away my fear. I grew cold and resolved, and I imagined myself joyfully blowing holes in the pulpy bodies of the Captains.

We crossed the chamber, progressing with more caution than before. Judging by the way Wall turned this way and that, searching for a means of egress—none was apparent—I had the notion that the existence of the chamber came as a surprise to him, that Junior must not have informed him of it. Unnerved by what this might mean, whether it was that the collars were not totally controlling and Junior had lied, or else that he had been so stupefied he had forgotten to mention the place, I put my hand on my pistol and turned to Maddy to see what her reaction might be to this turn of events; but as I did, a section of the wall opposite us slid back to reveal a wedge of darkness beyond, a void that the next moment was choked with emaciated men and women wearing metal collars like the one Junior had worn, dozens of them, all armed with knives and clubs, driven forward by white-furred apes that differed from the Edgeville apes by virtue of their barbaric clothing—leather harnesses and genital pouches. The most horrifying thing about their approach was that they—the men and women, not the apes—made no sound as they came; they might have been corpses reanimated by a spell.

I glanced back to the tunnel and saw that it was blocked with an equally savage-looking force; then the attackers were on us, chopping and slashing. There was no hope of aiming discriminately as Maddy had suggested. Everything became a chaos of gun shots and screams and snarling mouths, and we would have all died if it hadn't been for Wall. He swung his laser in sweeping arcs, cutting a swath in the ranks of our adversaries, and headed straight for the opening on the far side of the chamber and the darkness beyond it.

It was a matter of sheer luck that I was standing close to Wall when he made his charge. During the first thirty seconds of the attack I had emptied my pistol; I'm sure I hit something with every shot—it would have been nearly impossible not to do so—yet I have no clear memory of what I hit. Faces, ape and human, reeled into view, visible for split-seconds between other faces, between bodies, and blood was everywhere, streaking flesh, matting fur, spraying into the air. I simply poked the barrel of my pistol forward and fired until the hammer clicked. Then as I went to reload, a club glanced off the point of my left shoulder, momentarily numbing my hand, and I dropped the pistol. Even with the ape stink thickening the air, I could smell my own fear, a yellow, sour reek, and while I didn't have the time to indulge that fear, I felt it weakening me, felt it urging me to flee. And I might have if I had seen a safe harbor. I drew my knife and slashed at an ape's hand that was grabbing for me, going off-balance and falling backward into Wall. He shoved me away, and inad-

vertently I went in a staggering run toward the opening from which the apes and their collared army had emerged, so that in effect I wound up guarding his flank, though it was Maddy, beside me, who did the lion's share of the guarding. She had managed to reload, and in the brief time it took to cross the remaining distance she shot four apes and two collared men, while Wall burned down countless others, the laser severing limbs and torsos.

When we reached the darkness beyond the doorway, Wall turned back, continuing to fire into the melee, and shouted to us to search for a switch, a button, something that would close off the chamber. As I followed his order, my hands trembling, fumbling, groping at the wall, I saw that seven or eight of our group were pinned against the fountain, and before the wall slid shut to obscure my view, sealing us into the dark, I saw three fall, each killed by collared men and women. Many lay dead already, and many others, wounded, were trying to crawl away; but the apes were on them before they could get far, slicing with long-bladed knives at their necks. It appeared that the red water from the fountain had been splashed and puddled everywhere, and that the open-mouthed woman at the center of the fountain was screaming in a dozen voices, lamenting the carnage taking place around her.

The instant the chamber vanished from sight, isolating us in the dark, Wall demanded to know who had found the control, and when a woman's voice answered, he had her lead him to it and burned it with the laser so that the door could not be opened again. He then asked us to speak our names so that he could determine how many had survived. Sixteen names were sounded. Clay Fornoff's was not among them. I tried to remember if I had seen him fall, but could not. The darkness seemed to deepen with this recognition. I could see nothing; even though I knew that the door to the chamber was within arm's reach, I felt as if I were standing at the center of a limitless void. It seemed strange that only now, now that I could not see it, did I have a powerful apprehension of the size of the place.

"All right," Wall said. "We're in the shit, and we can't just stand around. Only way we're going to get home is to find one of the little bastards and make him show us a safe passage. We know they're in here somewhere. So let's go find 'em."

He said this with such relish, such apparent delight, as if what had occurred was exactly what he'd been hoping for, that—dismayed and frightened as I was—I found it kind of off-putting. Maybe his words affected others the same, because he didn't get much of a response.

"Do ye wanna die?" he asked us. "Or is it just you're scared of the dark? Well, I can fix that!"

I felt him push past me, saw the ruby stalk of the laser swing out into the blackness. In an instant several fires sprouted in the dark. Bushes

turned to torches by the laser, their light revealing an uneven terrain of moss or fungus or maybe even some sort of black grass, like a rug thrown over a roomful of lumpy furniture. Bushes and hollows and low rises. Here and there, barely visible in the flickering light, thin seams of gold were laid in against the black ground, and once again recalling *The Black Garden,* I realized that these likely signaled the location of doorways into secret rooms. There were no signs of walls or a ceiling. Even with the light, we had no way to judge the actual size of the place; but the fires gave us heart, and without further discussion, we headed for the nearest of those gold seams. When we reached it Wall burned down the door and we poured inside. By chance more than by dint of courage, I was beside him as we entered, and I had a clear view of the opulent interior. A cave-like space of irregular dimensions, considerably higher than it was long or wide, with a terraced floor and slanted ceiling, a golden grotto draped in crimson silks, stalks of crystal sprouting from the floor and a miniature waterfall splashing down upon boulders that looked to be pure gold. Silk cushions were strewn everywhere. An aquarium was set into the wall, teeming with brightly colored fish as different from the drab brown trout and bottom feeders with which I was familiar as gems from common rocks; the ornament of the aquarium through which the fish swam was a human spine and rib cage.

But what held my attention was the presence of three Captains lying on the cushions: two men and a woman, their pale, naked, hairless bodies almost childlike in appearance. There were also three collared women, who had apparently been sexually engaged with the Captains, and showed bruises and other marks of ill use, and a collared man who was obviously dead; his chest and limbs were deeply gashed, and he was lying arms akimbo by a wall, as if he had been tossed aside. When we entered, one of the Captains, the larger of the two men, put a knife to the throat of a collared woman; the other two reached for what I assumed to be weapons—short metal tubes resting on the floor at arm's reach; yet their movements were languid, casual, as if they were not really afraid of us. Or perhaps they were drugged. Whatever the case, they were overwhelmed before they could pick up the tubes and dragged from the room. The Captain holding the knife looked at me—directly at me, I'm sure of it—and smiling, slashed the woman's throat. She began to thrash about, clutching at the wound, and the Captain pushed her off to the side. He was still smiling. At me. The daft little shit was amused by my reaction. His androgynous features twisted with amusement. Something gave way inside me, some elemental restraint—I felt it as tangibly as I might have felt the parting of my tissues from a knife stroke—and I rushed at him, ignoring Wall's order to hold back. The Captain kind of waved the knife at me, but again he did not seem overly concerned with any threat I might pose. Even after I kicked the knife aside and yanked him to his

feet, even after I grabbed him by the throat and shoved him back against the wall, he continued to regard me with that mild, dissipated smile and those wet purplish eyes that gave no hint of what might lie behind, as empty as the eyes of a fish. I had the notion that I was doing exactly as he expected, and that my predictable behavior was something that reinforced his feelings of superiority.

"Let him go," said Wall from behind me.

"In a minute," I said, tightening my grip on the Captain's throat. I was still full of loathing, but it was a colder emotion now, albeit no less manageable. I fixed my gaze on those inhuman eyes, wanting to learn if anything would surface in them at the end, and I plunged my knife hilt-deep into the top of his skull. His mouth popped open, the eyes bulged, and thick blood flowed down over his head like syrup over a scoop of vanilla. Spasms shook him, and a stream of his piss wetted my legs. Then it was over, and I let him fall. It looked for all the world as though his head had grown a bone handle. In some part of me that had been obscured by anger, I could feel a trivial current of revulsion, but most of what I felt at first was satisfaction, though not long afterward I began to shake with the aftershocks of my violent act.

I turned to Wall, who stood regarding me with a thoughtful expression. "You got two of 'em," I said. "Two's enough."

Behind him, they were trying to remove the collars from the surviving women. Neither was doing well; blood was leaking from their ears.

"There's more," Wall said. "You gonna kill 'em all?"

The question did not seem in the least rhetorical, and I did not take it as such.

" 'Long as we're here," I said.

But I did no further killing that night. The vengeful, outraged spirit that had moved me gradually eroded as we passed through the Black Garden, led by the two collared Captains, our path lit by burning shrubs and doorways into golden light left open to reveal scenes of luxury and carnage, like a score of tiny stages mounted on the dark upon whose boards the same terrible play had been performed, and I only watched the others do the bloody work. The violence I'd committed had worked a change in me, or else had exposed some central weakness, and I grew disinterested in the outcome of our expedition. Maddy had to urge me along, or else I might have just stood there and waited for my end, displaying no more concern for my fate than the Captain that I'd killed; and I wondered if the fact that they had done so much violence was at the heart of their dismissive attitude toward life and death—but I don't believe that. To imbue them with human qualities would be assuming too much. They were no more human than the apes, and the apes, despite what I'd said long before to the man in the bubble car, which had been something I'd said mostly to impress him, were in no way human.

Apes came at us now and again as we went, singly sometimes and sometimes in small groups, flying at us from dark crannies, their knives flashing with reflected fire, and they succeeded in killing three of our people; but they were disorganized, without slaves to support them, and this gave us hope that the other three parties had done well, that the battle, if not yet finished, was on the verge of being won. We killed them all, and we also killed every Captain whom we came across.

Wall was in his element. He burned and burned, and when the laser gave out or broke or whatever it is that lasers do when they go wrong, he killed with his hands, in several instances literally tearing the heads off scrawny white necks. There was a joyful flair in the way he went about it, and I was not the only one who noticed this; I saw others staring at him with a confused mixture of awe and distaste as he carried out the business of slaughter. It was not that the Captains deserved any less, nor was it that vengeance was inappropriate to the moment. No, it was instead that Wall did not appear to be carrying out a vengeful process. Watching him was like watching a farmer scything wheat—here was a man engaged in his proper work and enjoying it immensely. The minor wounds he accumulated, the red stains that flowered on his rough shirt, his arms and face, gave him the look of an embattled hero, but the sort of hero, perhaps, whom we—who were ourselves the pitiful result of laws that heroes had written thousands of years before—no longer cared to exalt; and we moved ever more slowly in his wake, letting him run ahead of us, separating ourselves from him, as if this would lessen our complicity and devalue our support.

Still, we made no move to keep him from his pleasure. The things we found inside those golden rooms, the flayed bodies, bits of men and women used for ornament or more perverted purposes yet, the collared dead, the few that survived, shaking and delirious, all this legislated against our reining Wall in, and we might have let him go on forever had there been a sufficient number of Captains and if there had been nothing else to capture our attention. But then there came two explosions, distant, the one following hard upon the other, and a ragged cheer went up.

"We got it!" Maddy said; she sounded happy yet bewildered, as if she couldn't quite accept some great good news, and when I asked what the explosions signified, she said, "The ship. They must have blown up the other two. They weren't supposed to do that until we had the ship."

"You mean they flew it away and all?" I said.

"I think so!" She gave my hand a squeeze. In the garish orange light of the burning, she looked like she was about to hop up and down from excitement. "I can't be sure 'til we see for ourselves, but I think so."

Wall was prevailed upon to break off his hunt, so we could determine what had happened, and with the two collared Captains still in the lead, we began to make our way back toward the crater.

But Wall was not yet finished with death.

As we came out from yet another hidden door into the chamber where we had been ambushed, we spotted an ape squatting by one of its fallen companions, rocking back and forth on its heels in an attitude that seemed to signal grief, though—again—I can't say for certain what the thing was doing there. Just as likely it had gone crazy over something I could never understand. Someone fired at it, and with a fierce scream, it scuttled off into the tunnel that angled up toward the crater.

Wall sprinted after it.

A handful of people, Maddy included, followed him at a good clip, but the rest of us, governed by a weary unanimity, kept plodding along, stepping between the bodies, friend and foe, that lay everywhere. I'd seen so much dying that night, you would have thought that the scene in the chamber would not have affected me, but it took me by storm. That red fountain and the woman of stone and the bloody hieroglyphs figuring the tiles, and now the bodies, more than a hundred of them, I reckoned, scattered about under benches, in the ferns, their pallor and the brightness of their blood accentuated by the glaring light—it was such a unity of awful place and terrible event, it struck deep, and I knew it would hurt me forever, like a work of art whose lines and colors match up perfectly with some circuit in your brain or some heretofore unmapped country in your soul, all the graceless attitudes of the dead's arms and legs and the humped bodies like archipelagoes in a sea of red.

I found Clay Fornoff lying under the lip of the fountain, his chest pierced innumerable times, eyes open, blond hair slick with blood. Something, an ape probably, had chewed away part of his cheek. Tears started from my eyes—I don't know why. Maybe because I couldn't disassociate Clay from Bradley, or maybe it was just death working its old sentimental trick on me, or maybe I'd hoped to reconcile with Clay and now that hope was gone I felt the loss. I don't know. It was no matter anymore, whatever the reason. Feeling as tired as I'd ever been, I kneeled beside him and collected his personals, his gun, a silver ring of Windbroken design, a leather wallet, and a whistle whittled out of some hard yellowish wood. I intended to give them to his folks if I ever saw them again, but I ended up keeping the whistle. I'd never figured Clay to be one for making whistles, and I suppose I wanted to keep that fact about him in mind.

I couldn't think of anything much to say over him, so I just bowed my head and let whatever I was feeling run out of me. I recall thinking I was glad I hadn't seen him die, and then wishing I had, and then wondering whether he had been brave or a fool or both. Then there was nothing left but silence. I closed his eyes and walked on up the tunnel.

Wall had caught up with the ape—or the ape had let him catch it—at the end of the tunnel, right where the canopy of foliage began, and he was fighting it hand to hand when I straggled up, while the remainder of

those who had survived the ambush and the Garden stood in a semi-circle and watched. Without much enthusiasm, I thought. Their faces slack and exhausted-looking.

Wall had killed apes with his bare hands before; he was one of the few men alive strong enough to accomplish this, and under different circumstances it might have been incredible to see, like a scene out of a storybook, this giant locked up hard with a six-foot white-furred ape in a leather harness. But as things stood, realizing that this was just more of Wall's . . . I'm not sure what to call it, because it was more than him showing off. His folly, I guess. His making certain that the world stayed as violent and disgraceful as he needed it to be. Anyway, recognizing this, the sight of the two of them rolling about, tearing and biting, screaming, grunting, it did not seem vital or heroic to me, merely sad and depressing. To tell the truth, despite everything that had happened, I had a fleeting moment during which I found myself rooting for the ape; at least, I thought, it had displayed something akin to human emotion back in the chamber.

There came a point when, still grappling, they came to their feet and reeled off along the canopied pathway; mired in that green dimness they seemed even more creatures out of legend, the ape's small head with its bared fangs pressed close to the great shaggy bulk of Wall's head. Like insane lovers. Wall's arms locked behind the ape's back, his muscles bunched like coiled snakes, and the ape clawing at Wall's neck. Then Wall heaved with all his might, at the same time twisting his upper body, a wrestler's quick move, lifting the ape and slinging it up and out higher than his head, its limbs flailing, to fetch up hard against a tree trunk. The ape was hurt bad. It came up into a crouch, but fell onto its side and made a mewling sound; it clawed frantically at its own back, as if trying to reach some unreachable wound. Finally it got to its feet, but it was an unsteady, feeble movement, like that of an old man who's mislaid his cane. It snarled at Wall, a grating noise that reminded me of a crotchety generator starting up. I could tell it wanted to charge him, that its ferocity was unimpaired, but it was out of juice, and so was waiting for Wall to come to it. And Wall would have done just that if Maddy, who was standing about ten feet away from me, hadn't taken her pistol and shot the ape twice in the chest.

Wall stared incredulously at the ape for a second, his chest heaving, watching it twitch and bleed among the ferns lining the path; then he spun about, and asked Maddy what the fuck she'd had in mind.

"We got better to do than watch you prove what a man you are." She looked drawn and on edge, and her pistol was still in hand, trained a little to the left of Wall.

"Who the hell put ye in charge?" he said.

"You want to argue 'bout it," she said, "we'll argue later. Right now we got to get movin'."

"Goddamn it!" Wall took a step toward her. With his hair falling wild about his shoulders and his coarse features stamped with sullen anger, he looked every inch an ogre, and he towered over Maddy. "I'm sick right down to the bone of your bullshit. There ain't a single damn thing we done, you ain't stood in the way of." He started toward her again, and Maddy let the pistol swing a few degrees to the right. Wall stopped his advance.

"You don't care who you kill, do you?" she said. "Can't be the ape, might as well be one of us."

Wall put his hands on his hips and glared at her. "Go on and shoot, if that's your pleasure."

"Nothin' 'bout this here is my pleasure," she said. "You know that. Just leave it alone, Wall. You've had your victory, you've got your ship. Let's go home."

"You hear this?" Wall said to the others, none of whom had changed their listless expressions and attitudes. "I mean have you been listenin' to her?"

"They're too damn tired to listen," Maddy told him. "Death and killin' makes people tired. That's somepin' you ain't figured out yet."

Wall kept staring at her for a few beats, then let out a forceful breath. "All right," he said. "All right for now. But we're gonna settle this later."

And with that he strode off along the path, ripping away a big rubbery leaf that hung down in his face with a furious gesture; he quickly rounded a turn and went out of sight, like he didn't much care if any of us were to follow.

"Son of a bitch ain't gonna be happy till he gets every one of us dead," Maddy said, holstering her pistol; the lines around her mouth were etched sharp, and she looked years older than she had earlier in the evening. But then maybe we all did.

It wasn't my place to say anything, I suppose, but since Wall had been part of Edgeville for a time, I felt an old loyalty to him.

"He mighta got carried away some," I said. "But you can't deny he's done us all a world of good down there today."

Maddy dropped a little thong over the hammer of her pistol to keep it from bouncing out of the holster; she gave me a sharp look.

"You don't know nothin' 'bout Wall like you think you do," she told me in a weary tone. "But you stick around, you gonna find out way more'n you can stand."

When at last we reached the surface and took shelter among the rocks, we discovered that only about hundred and thirty of us had survived the Garden. Brad and Callie were fine, as were most of those who had stayed with the flying machines; there had been scant fighting in the crater. But of the nearly four hundred who had gone deep into the Garden, less than

seventy had returned, along with a handful of men and women who'd been saved from the collars, and five Captains. Wall wanted to ride out immediately, to return to wherever it was they'd set out from; but Coley, Maddy, and others told him, Fine, go ahead, but we're going to wait a while and see if anyone else comes out. More than three hundred dead had shaken people's faith in Wall—that was a sight more than what you would call "light casualties," and resentment against him appeared to be running high, even though we'd managed to steal the flying machine. I had thought the argument between him and Maddy was personal, but it was now obvious that politics was involved.

After heated discussion, it was decided that Wall would take a group on ahead, and the rest of us would follow within the hour. But then they got to arguing about how many were to go with Wall and how many were to stay, and whether or not all the prisoners, who were sitting against boulders at the edge of the hardpan, should go with Wall's party. It was hard to credit that people who had so recently fought together could now be all snarled up in these petty matters, and after a few minutes of hanging about the fringes of the argument, I gave up on them and went off and sat with Brad and Callie higher up among the boulders.

From the way everything looked, with that golden light still streaming up from the crater, and the moonstruck hardpan running flat and fissured to the mountains on the horizon, and cold stars glinting through thin scudding clouds, it appeared that nothing much could have happened down below the world; I would have expected some sign of what had transpired, colored smokes curling up, strange flickering radiances, a steam of dead souls rising from the deep, and there should have been scents of rot and corruption on the wind, not merely the cool, dry smell of desolation; but all was as peaceful and empty as before, and for some reason this lack of evidence that anything had occurred afflicted me and I began to remember the things I had witnessed and the things I had done. As each of them passed before my mind's eye, a new weight settled in my chest, making a pressure that hurt my heart and caused the flow of my thoughts to stick and swell in my head as if something had dammed them up. Brad asked me about Kiri, about Clay, and all I could do was shake my head and say I'd tell him later. Of course he must have known Clay was done for, seeing I had the man's possessions. But I didn't realize this at the time, because all my mind was turned inside.

I have no idea how much time had passed, but Wall, Maddy and the rest were still arguing down on the edge of the hardpan when the last survivors crawled up over the rim of the crater and came toward us at a sluggish pace, black and tiny and featureless against the golden light, like sick ants wandering away from a poisoned hole. They were strung out over about a dozen yards or so. Twenty, twenty-five of them. And as they drew near, the group who'd been arguing broke up and some went

out to meet them. A couple looked to be wounded and were being supported by their companions. Brad got to his feet and moved a few feet downslope, staring out at them. I was so worn out, I couldn't think what might have caught his interest, and even when he started out across the hardpan all I said to Callie was, "Where the hell's he goin'?" But Callie, too, had gotten to her feet by then and was peering hard in the direction of the stragglers.

"Damn," she said. "I think . . ." She broke off and moved closer to the edge of the hardpan. I saw her Adam's apple working. "Bob, it's her," she said.

I stood and had a look for myself and saw a lean, dark woman stepping toward us; she was too far away for me to make out her features, but her quick stride and stiff posture, things I'd always taken for telltales of Kiri's rage, were thoroughly familiar.

What was passing through my mind as I walked out onto the hardpan toward Kiri was almost every emotion I've ever had, up to love and down to fear and all their lesser permutations. I'd like to believe that the main thing I felt was relief and happiness, and I'm pretty sure that's the case, but I know that it was mixed in with a sizable portion of worry about what would happen to all of us now. I had already given up on Kiri, you see; I had buried her and the past along with her, and it wasn't easy to recalibrate my heart and mind to her presence.

She had one of the Bad Men's coats draped over her shoulders and was naked underneath it; she hardly seemed to see Brad, who was hanging on her when I came up; her eyes were fixed on some point beyond us both, and though her gaze wavered and cut toward me, the only other sign of acknowledgment she gave was to tousle Brad's hair absently and say something in a croaky voice that might have been my name, but might also have been an involuntary noise. An old bruise was going yellow on one of her cheekbones, and when the wind feathered her hair, I saw the marks on her neck made by a collar; but otherwise she seemed fine, albeit distant . . . Though as it turned out, I mistook single-mindedness for abstraction.

As we reached the group of Bad Men waiting at the bottom of the slope, Kiri gave me a hard shove, sending me staggering, and although I hadn't felt her hand on my sheath, I saw my knife in her hand. Quick as a witch, before anybody could move, she was in among the Bad Men and had grabbed one of the seated Captains and dragged him upslope behind a boulder. Some made to go after her, but Wall blocked their way and said, "I were you, I wouldn't try to stop her."

Coley—I recognized him by the red ribbon on his hat—said something by way of disagreement, but there was not much point in arguing about this particular trouble. A high-pitched scream issued from back of the boulder; it faltered, but then kept on going higher and higher, lasting an

unreasonable length of time. It broke off suddenly, as if the voice had been permanently stilled; but soon it started up again. And so it went for a goodly while. Starting and stopping, growing weaker but no less agonized. It was plain Kiri had found a way of engaging the Captain's interest in the matter of life and death.

When at last she stood up from behind the boulder, she was wild-eyed, covered with blood, her face so strained it appeared her cheekbones might punch through the skin. I caught sight of Brad standing off to the side near Callie. He looked like he was about to cry, and I understood that he must understand what I known for a while—that though we had found Kiri, she would never find us again. Whether it had been the lost duel or her troubles with me or everything since or a combination of all those things, she was gone into a distance where we could never travel, into the world that had bred her, a world whose laws would never again permit the enfeebling consolations of home and hearth.

We all watched her, standing in ragged ranks like a congregation stunned and disoriented by some terrible revelation from the pulpit, waiting for her to give some sign of what she might do next, but she remained motionless—she might have been a machine that had been switched off. The silence was so deep, I could hear the wind skittering gravel across the hardpan, and I had the notion that the night was hardening around us, sealing us inside the moment—it felt more like resolution than anything that had happened down in the crater. Like a violent signature in the corner of a painting of blood and degradation and loss. Finally Wall moved up beside her. He outweighed her by a couple of hundred pounds, but even so he was extremely cautious in his approach. He was talking to her, but I couldn't make out the words; from the sound of the fragments I was able to distinguish, however, I figured he was speaking in a northern tongue, one they shared. After a bit he took the knife from her hand and wiped it clean on his coat.

"Well then," he said to us, without a trace of sarcasm and maybe with just a touch of regret. "I guess we can go now."

In the end it happened that Wall was proved both right and wrong. As he'd predicted, the Captains weren't able to root us out of the deep places where we hid, but they came damn close and many lives were lost. Eventually that time passed, and things returned to normal . . . at least as normal as normal gets out here in the Big Nothing. We live in a strange subterranean labyrinth beneath a black mesa, a place of tunnels and storage chambers containing all manner of marvels, and machines whose purpose we may never determine, where once our ancestors slept and dreamed of a sweet untroubled world that would be born upon their waking. Bradley attends school, and though the subjects he studies are far removed from the rudimentary ones he studied back on the Edge, he re-

mains nonetheless a schoolboy. I grow vegetables and fruits and wheat and such on the subsurface farms; Callie helps to administer stocks of food and weapons and so forth; Kiri trains our people in combat. And Wall . . . well, Wall is elsewhere, in some secret place with his captured flying machine, overseeing the study of its engines and plotting for the day when we'll have a fleet of such machines that will bear us up to the stations to carry out his notion of a proper vengeance. So it would seem that very little has changed for us, but of course almost everything has.

When I finished the main body of this story, I showed it to Callie and after she had read it she asked why I'd called it "Human History," because it dealt with such a brief period of time and ignored what we had learned of the world of our ancestors. And that's the truth, it does ignore all that. I've seen the paintings our ancestors created, I've read their books and listened to their music, I've experienced no end of their lofty thoughts and glorious expressions, and I admire them for the most part. But they don't counterbalance the mass slaughters, the barbarities, the unending tortures and torments, the vilenesses, the sicknesses, the tribal idiocies, the trillion rapes and humiliations that comprise the history of that world up until its mysterious ending (I doubt we'll ever learn what happened, unless the Captains decide to tell us). What the Captains did to us in the Black Garden pales by comparison to the nature of those ancient atrocities, even if you figure in seven hundred years of evil duplicity. And at any rate, to my mind the Captains are relics of that old world, and soon they'll be gone, relegated to that distant past. As will, I believe, men and women such as Wall and Kiri. And there we'll be, the whole human race freed from that tired old history, maybe not completely, but with a chance of doing something new, if we've got the heart to take it.

Back when I was living in Edgeville, I never thought much about God or religion. The Captains, I suppose, took the place of God, and having God available to talk with at any hour of the day or night caused me to think less than perhaps I should have about the mystery of life. But maybe that was a blessing in disguise, because when I look back at all the trouble caused by religion in the old world, I have to think that I'm better off the way I am. Once I found an ageworn Bible, and in the front was a picture of the God known as Jehovah, an old man with fierce eyes and cruel lips and a beard and tufted eyebrows. He looked a lot like Wall, and sometimes when I go outside and glance up into the stormy sky—the skies out here are rarely clear—I imagine I see that angry old bearded Jehovah face come boiling out of the snow clouds, and I wonder if Wall wasn't standing in for him, if he wasn't the kind of leader men once made in the image of their god—strong, blustery, bloody-minded men who knew only one way of achieving their goals. We need Wall and Kiri now, we need their violent hearts, their death-driven need to dominate; but it's clear—at least so it seems—that there'll soon come a time when we won't

need them any longer, and maybe that's all we can hope for, that we'll learn to choose our leaders differently, that we won't end up apes or Captains.

Old Hay forgot to tell me how to wind down a story, and I'm sure I'm going about it all wrong, trying to explain what I mean by "Human History," and how limiting the definition of that term to a period of a few weeks of happiness and a betrayal and a ride out onto the flats and a battle seems to incorporate all the essentials of the process, as well as to voice some faint hope that we can change. But it's my story, the only one I've got worth telling, so I'll just go ahead and do my worst and hope that having it finish wrong or awkwardly will suit the ungainly nature of the tale, its half-formed resolution, and the frayed endings and uncompleted gestures that make up most of the substance of our lives.

In the days and weeks that followed the battle, Callie and I drifted apart. This was chiefly due to Kiri's presence—we could not feel easy with her around, even though she did not display the least interest in either one of us. I had an affair with Maddy, more of a healing than a passion. No hearts were broken, no souls transformed, but it was a fine place to be for the time it lasted. Even in the midst of it I half hoped that Callie and I might get back together, but after Maddy and I went our separate ways, Callie remained aloof from me and I could not find it in myself to go to her. As had happened that night when Kiri had caught us at it in the store, I came to have a sense that the love we'd made back then had been childish, that the people we'd been were characters, part of a Dramatis Personæ, our desire a consummate fakery, emblematic of a need to be the center of attention of those around us, like actors in a pleasureable yet somehow despicable farce. And so we continued to deny what now seems inevitable.

I won't try to make any great dramatic presentation of how we did get back together, because it wasn't dramatic in the least. One night she walked into the little room I'd made for myself on one of the farms to sleep in when I didn't want to return to my regular quarters, and after some dodging around and a bit of inconsequential talk, we became lovers again. But the grave tenderness we expressed, touching each other carefully, treasuringly, like a blind man would touch the face of a statue, it was a far cry from the way it had been back in Edgeville, from our sweaty, joyful, self-deluding first time, and I recognized that whatever good had existed in our beginning had grown and flourished, and that's the wonder of it, that's the amazing thing, that despite the betrayals and failures and all the confused principles that contend in us, seed will sprout in this barren soil we call the human spirit and sometimes grow into something straight and green and true. As I lay with Callie that night, maybe it was wrong of me, but I couldn't feel sorry for anything that had happened, for any of us, not even for Kiri in the black wish of

her sleep shaping herself into an arrow that one day would find an enemy's heart. It occurred to me that we were all becoming what we needed to be, what our beginnings had charged us to become: Kiri a death; Brad a man; Callie and I ordinary lovers, something we might once have taken for granted, but that now we both understood was more than we'd ever had the right to hope that we could come to be. It was a pure and powerful feeling to tear away the shreds and tatters of our old compulsions, and steep ourselves in the peace that we gave to one another, and know who we were and why, that Bad Men were mostly only good men gone over the edge to freedom, and that the past was just about done with dying, and the future was at hand. ●

DODOES

Listen. Listen.
The terns are spreading the news from pole to pole:
pigs and dogs and men got the dodoes,
fat gnome-like cousins of little wing, less wit.
Alas, alas, they were incapable of flight,
speed, or self-defense, these dodoes.
They had no survival value.

Still, one would think that the slaughter
of even so pathetic a creature as a dodo
should arouse feelings of loss
among its feathered brethren.
But, listen, listen,
the great auks are laughing.

—Steven Utley

WE HAVE MET THE ALIENS

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TERMINAL CAFÉ
Ian McDonald
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We have met the aliens.
And they are us?
Most of the time they seem to be.

All too often, the aliens we meet in science fiction tales are pantomime horses of varying degrees of artifice and art, animated nevertheless by distorted versions of our very own selves.

Indeed, it might be argued that this is inevitable.

Human writers have certainly proven capable of imagining and describing sapient beings with any number of tentacles or pseudopods, with trilateral symmetry, with metabolisms based on chlorine or a silicon-based biochemistry, inhabiting Mars or Venus or the Jovian atmosphere or the hard vacuum of space itself and doing so in a literarily convincing and scientifically credible manner. Human writers have succeeded in elaborating complex civilizations based on such alien biological premises. Human writers have even succeeded in creating fictional beings whose motivational psychology seems quite different from their own.

But when it comes to portraying a truly alien consciousness from within, to imbuing the fictional alien with an inner life, human writers are by the very limits of their own natures reduced to holding up a distorting mirror to their own.

It seems obvious that any given consciousness, for example that of a human science fiction writer, cannot *really* contain another consciousness, however imaginary, greater than its own, let alone portray it convincingly for an equally limited human reader. Perhaps less certainly, it could be, and has been, argued that by the very definition of the word, any given consciousness cannot *really* compre-

hend the inner life of a being sufficiently different from itself to be truly called "alien."

But of course science fiction writers keep trying anyway.

For if it could be argued that extraterrestrial settings are central to what makes science fiction science fiction when it comes to locales, it can certainly be argued that the alien being is as characteristic of the genre as the cowboy is of the western.

Inhabitants of other planets, biologically or technologically mutated humans, manufactured androids, sapient robots, dybbuks of cyberspace, whatever, the confrontation of the human consciousness with the Other has been a thematic fascination of science fiction since before the genre was born.

And while it may be going too far to claim that the confrontation with the Other is *the* central theme of science fiction, it would not be going all that far to say that science fiction is the only modern fictional mode capable of attempting to deal with it in an emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually credible manner.

True, fictional non-human sapiences are as old as the earliest legends of gods and goddesses, and true too that fantasy, both classic and contemporary, also treats with non-human intelligences.

But the gods and goddesses are mostly portrayed as either humans possessed of superpowers whose motivations are, alas, all too close to home or omnipotent and omniscient beings impossible and indeed unwise for mere mortals to even seek to comprehend.

And the vampires and changelings, the loas and the undead, the ghosties and the ghoulies, the fairy godmothers and erl-kings, the good and the evil non-human sapients of fantasy resonating up and through the collective unconsciousness of the species, are, by the essential literary definition thereof, *supernatural*, characters in whom the modern reader must *invest* a willing suspension of disbelief.

Science fiction, however, must invert that literary transaction. Unlike writers of fantasy, science fiction writers must *create* that suspension of the readers' disbelief in Otherness. If there is a *pragmatic* literary distinction between fantasy and science fiction, this is surely it. Fantasy writers may assume their readers are willingly from Oz. Science fiction writers must assume that theirs are from Missouri.

Which is close to saying that science fiction writers, and science fiction writers alone, have, of necessity, been forced to develop the literary tools to convince their readers that they are doing the essentially undoable—bringing onstage the non-human being, the Other, even the transcendent consciousness, and doing so in a manner that both persuades the readers that this is taking place within the realm of the possible and makes some sort of empathetic connection between the alien consciousness and their own.

These two literary tasks are syn-

ergetically related. The more one succeeds in convincing the reader that the non-human being is a creature of the possible, the more likely such an empathetic connection is to be made. And on a strictly literary level, questions of scientific credibility aside, the more one succeeds in establishing that empathetic connection, the more likely readers are to grant that suspension of disbelief necessary to accept the Other as a possible creature of the same universe as their own.

But there is a paradox here, too, within which the writer of this sort of thing is forced to operate. Namely, that the closer the alien is to an exotic pantomime horse with a more or less psychologically recognizable human consciousness inside, the more likely that empathetic connection is to be made, but the less credibly *alien* the character. Contrariwise, the more disconnected from human comprehensibility the alien consciousness portrayed, the more credibly alien, but the less likely that empathetic connection to the readers' consciousness is to be made.

Contrast, for example, Paul Park's *The Starbridge Chronicles* trilogy with his new novel, *Celestis.*

In the trilogy, we have an imaginary world of baroque complexity, reminiscent of Jack Vance at his most extravagant and then some, peopled (and that *is* the word) by a cast of characters most of whom it would appear are not exactly biologically human. But while the astronomy, the biology, the ecology, the cultures, even the bodies in which these fictional consciousnesses are embedded may be exotic, when all is said and done, the cores of their inner lives are not truly alien to our own. We accept them psychologically as humans, tails and all.

This is the way it is usually done, especially when the central goal is to create and portray a complex and complexly alien culture or even set of cultures as Park has done in *The Starbridge Chronicles.* Genomically human or not, *psychologically* more or less human aliens allow an emotional and intellectual access to a created universe that otherwise might become entirely incomprehensible. It's one thing to create aliens, but another to alienate the reader.

And still a third to portray the alienation between the human and the alien or even the alienation of an alien from her own alien nature, which is the formidable task Park has attempted in *Celestis.*

It's hard to imagine a more thorough change of mode from *The Starbridge Chronicles* than this. Here, an extrasolar planet has been taken over by colonists from a future Earth who singlemindedly seem determined to turn it into a kind of Disneyized recreation of a long-vanished sanitized American heartland that never quite was. So thoroughly have the superficially humanoid natives been brainwashed that the majority of them undergo painful surgery, wear various complex prostheses, take expensive and unpleasant drugs, in the endeavor to bend their culture,

their psyches, their very biology, to the subtly imposed human norm.

Played for laughs, this might be taken as satire of British colonial behavior in Africa or India, or a painfully extended metaphor of the confrontation between whites and blacks in America. But it isn't.

For while the colonial society with its pseudo-twentieth (or even nineteenth) century trappings, down to recognizable brand-names, as portrayed lacks a certain *credibility* given the future time-frame, if one is willing to swallow one's disbelief in its probability, it doesn't lack *verisimilitude*. It is finely detailed. It is carefully and seriously described. Accept the questionable premise, and it all holds together.

Certainly there's nothing funny about it. No satirical intent. No laughs. Park takes it quite seriously and expects the reader to do the same.

What it seems to be is a kind of set-up, a familiar milieu, even a deliberately overly familiar one, in which Park seeks to embed the truly alien, a setting for a love story between Simon, a human diplomat, and Katherine, an alien native.

Well, sort of. Well, not exactly. Well, not really.

Actually, not at all.

Katherine, as long as she takes her drugs, seems to be superficially and even psychologically more or less a human woman. And the somewhat less than culturally credible American colonial milieu, with its familiar but therefore anachronistic whiff of backyard barbecues and magnolias, cunningly gulls the readers into accepting this as one of those star-crossed cross-cultural love stories with which they believe they are familiar, even as Simon manages to convince himself that this is what's happening. Even Katherine herself, to whose consciousness we are privy as a viewpoint character, seems to be taking things on something like this level initially.

But comes the revolution or something more or less like it, Simon and Katherine flee into the outback in the company of various humans and aliens, the drugs begin to wear off, and we see that what Katherine has been all along is not a human at all, not even exactly female, but a truly alien creature bent, like her people, into an ultimately futile and masochistic effort to become a pseudohuman, an alien forcibly self-alienated from her own alien nature.

As that nature begins to reassert itself, the literary task of describing this process from within becomes harder and harder. Toward the end, conventional straightforward description based on straight metaphorical and analogical reference to human imagery will not do. In the sections narrated through Katherine's point of view, the prose becomes less and less descriptive, more and more recondite and allusive, and what is actually happening in them becomes harder and harder to follow on a phenomenological level.

Is this a failure on Park's part?

Well, yes and no.

Paul Park, human writer that he is, unsurprisingly, does not entirely succeed in portraying the stepwise internal transformation of an alienated pseudohuman alien back into an authentically alien being in a manner fully comprehensible to his fellow human readers.

How can he?

Indeed, Simon-the-human's inability to truly apprehend Katherine-the-alien's internal reality is a central point of the book, and the three-way tension between the straight phenomenological events (if such may be said to exist) and their increasingly divergent worldviews of same, its central dramatic engine.

Thus, paradoxically enough, Park's partial failure to convey the inner landscape of the emergent alien consciousness in a fully comprehensible manner, intercut as it is with Simon's human point of view on many of the same external events, does end up adding psychological verisimilitude to his human character's existential situation.

Perhaps a novel like *Celestis*, existing as it does squarely and bravely on the very central paradox of the human attempting to convey the inner life of the alien, can never be an absolute success on its own chosen terms.

A much more common technique is to use limitation and indirection to get around it, as Patrick O'Leary has done in an interesting and excellent first novel, *Door Number Three*.

O'Leary confines himself to a single first-person narrator, a human one, John Donelly. Donelly is a near-future (or perhaps in a certain sense alternate present) psychiatrist, and seldom, at least within the realm of science fiction, has the work and the inner life of a psychiatrist been more convincingly depicted than this.

The alien intrudes into the life of this alienist (interesting that "alienist" is an archaic term for shrink!) in the person of Laura, a human woman who claims that she has been raised by the alien Holocks, who have dropped her back on Earth, and given her a year to convince one person—namely Donelly—that her story is true, else they will snatch her back, and certain other dire circumstances will also ensue.

And shows him the square nipple of her breast as phenomenological proof that she is from somewhere Other than Kansas.

Thus, at least initially, the alien is introduced at triple remove: as figment of the delusional system of a patient being treated for same by a psychiatrist who is recounting the case history in first person to the reader.

Well, there *is* that square nipple, and this *is* a clearly labeled science fiction novel published in a science fiction line, so the reader can easily enough deduce that the Holocks and their world will not turn out to be the delusionary fantasies of a deranged mind that Donelly, unlike the reader, not unreasonably, initially assumes.

Which points to one of the unfor-

tunate literary consequences of genre labeling and packaging, at least for a novel like this. For without it—if *Door Number Three* had been packaged in the manner of, say, *The Jet-Propelled Couch*—the tension between the quotidian and the emerging alien and the reader's interest in Donelly's process of discovery would have been heightened and maintained a while longer without O'Leary having changed one word of the text.

Well, be that as it may, yes, Virginia, there *are* Holocks, they are quite alien, though rather than being from another where, they're from another when.

This first emerges via Laura's psychotherapy sessions, and via the intrusions of their agencies into Donelly's dreamlife. And even though *Door Number Three* surfs the edge of the comic throughout, O'Leary's depiction of the dreamtime, the dreamtime of a psychiatrist able to interpret it in the act, at that, is really top-drawer.

Later on, the Holocks emerge into the real world, whatever *that* may be, in various sinister secondary forms, and still later, via a process more or less akin to lucid dreaming, Donelly and the reader get the grand tour of their weird world, and its true nature is revealed, all in the service of a fairly standard but satisfying save-the-world denouement.

But throughout O'Leary carefully maintains his and his narrator's distance from the alien Holocks. Since everything is told from Donelly's first person viewpoint, O'Leary legitimately avoids having to depict the inside of anyone or anything else's head. The Holocks do not really intrude into our (Donelly's) reality save in disguised form, as alien consciousnesses inside more or less *human* pantomime horses.

Even Donelly's climactic voyage to *their* world is held at a certain psychic remove; O'Leary has prepared the reader for it by first depicting aspects via Laura's secondhand description, then in Donelly's dreams, so by the time we get there in storytime realtime, it has the feel of the dreamtime, especially since certain working aspects of lucid dreaming would seem to pertain.

Is this the easy way out?

Well, maybe.

But on the other hand, there are nine and sixty ways of constructing tribal lays, and when it comes to the alien, *this* one, properly done as it is here, *is* right. Such use of creative *limitation* to avoid the creative difficulties of the depiction of the inner life of the Other by the human writer has long been one of science fiction's tried and true default value solutions. Often tried because often true. True because it works.

Not that it is the only tried and true method that can work. Science fiction's other main default value solution to the paradoxes inherent in confronting the alien is quite the opposite, namely to play let's pretend.

Or maybe let's *not* pretend.

Let's pretend that the thought

process of nonhuman or transhuman or mutated human sapient creatures will not be *that* much different from our own. Let's pretend that while their cultural premises may be different and their goals may be alien and their means of achieving them outré, they will still be more or less motivated by the same palette of emotions we know and love and detest: love, hate, lust, the drive for dominance, the desire for transcendence, territoriality, the imperative to perpetuate their own kind.

But let's *not* pretend that this is anything but science fiction, that the above is a likely description of existential reality, rather than a literary convention adopted for the literary purpose of being able to tell such a tale at all.

"Science fiction that *knows* it's science fiction," in Alexei Panshin's cogent phrase. Science fiction that the *reader* knows is science fiction, that requires the reader to accept certain stylized conventions thereof. Science fiction that approaches fantasy asymptotically as a limit, the hard SF purists might say.

But if the story works, what the hell.

Lethe, a first novel by Tricia Sullivan, is a pretty good example of the more or less successful use of this convention.

In Sullivan's future, the Earth has suffered the more or less standard ecological screwjob, plus the Gene Wars, which have left examples of the pure original human genotype to linger in sealed dome reservations while various mutant versions dominate the surface, the whole governed by the Pickled Brains, bodiless cerebral organs interfaced both to computers and via Altermoders (mutant humans who can transform themselves into sort of telepathic gilled creatures) to the sapient dolphins and their supercomputational group mind.

There are two main third person viewpoint characters (though by clever story-within-story techniques Sullivan introduces a few others): Jenae, one of the aforementioned Altermoders, and Daire, a human man who ends up marooned on a strange planet dominated and pretty much covered by the lywyn, a sort of sapient forest, and inhabited by refugees from Earth who seem to be genotypically human, but whose life cycle proves to be otherwise.

Phew!

As you can see from the above, which is a mere thumbnail description of an exceedingly complex and rather well-realized set-up and the premise for a satisfyingly intricate story the reader's enjoyment of which would not be served by an attempt to summarize the plot here, the cast of sapient characters in *Lethe* includes several kinds of human mutants, dolphins, a conscious forest, and brains in bottles.

To attempt to portray the consciousnesses of all of these sapient beings within the same novel on the level that, for example, Paul Park has attempted with *one* alien in *Celestis,* would be a task of such daunting complexity that even an egomaniac on methedrene could

probably not summon up the hubris necessary to try.

But Tricia Sullivan cannot tell this story without doing it.

In ruthlessly rigorous hard science fiction terms, this might be an unresolvable paradox.

But science fiction that knows it's science fiction, science fiction that the readers are expected to take on that level, and therefore collaborate in the suspension of their own disbelief, hands Sullivan the sword with which she, like so many before her, slices through this particular Gordian knot.

Namely the long-accepted and literarily useful convention that while the readers know damn well that in the real world the actual thoughts and feelings of such a panoply of alien consciousnesses would be entirely impossible to imagine or describe, in the literary world of science fiction that knows it's science fiction, the writer can use human thoughts, emotions, motivations, and feelings as the common template, and nuance them with various flavors of strangeness to *suggest* their Otherness.

If you protest that this can and has served as an excellent excuse for the production of enormous mountains of sci-fi crap, for Octopoids from Arcturus with Brooklyn accents, Nazis in lizard-suit drag, Teenage Mutant Bug-Eyed Monsters, Wookies and Wonkies and Things that Go Schlock in the Night, of course you are right.

But properly and seriously utilized as Tricia Sullivan has done here, this literary convention has also made possible much that lies at the creative heart of the SF canon; everything from Larry Niven's and Hal Clement's total oeuvres to William Burroughs' *Nova Express,* from much of the best work of Poul Anderson to Isaac Asimov's robots, from Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End* to Theodore Sturgeon's *Venus Plus X,* from Cordwainer Smith's tales of the Instrumentality to David Brin's Uplift War cycle, to mention an entirely random sampling of the five-hundred-foot shelf.

Which is not to say that the inverse has not also produced a central core of the best of modern science fiction—everything in this case from Theodore Sturgeon's *More than Human* to Frank Herbert's *Dune,* from Alfred Bester's *The Demolished Man* and *The Stars My Destination,* from Poul Anderson's *Brain Wave* to Robert A. Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land,* from Brian W. Aldiss's *Barefoot in the Head* to great swatches of J.G. Ballard and A.E. Van Vogt.

Namely, science fiction in which the aliens indeed *are* us, in which the viewpoint characters through whom we see the tale may be genotypically human down to the last base-pair of the last gene on the last chromosome, but their inner landscapes and/or the cultural landscapes through which they move are alien.

This, of course, is a matter of degree. Science fiction can hardly be science fiction without doing this in one way or another to a certain

extent. Sturgeon gives us psychic mutants in a contemporary setting. Heinlein does likewise with a human raised by aliens on Mars. Herbert gives us a prescient messiah on another planet in the far future. Bester gives us mutated settings through consciousnesses so mutated that the prose itself mutates in *The Demolished Man* and pages even mutate beyond prose itself in *The Stars My Destination.* Aldiss doses Europe with LSD, mimics the psychic effect thereof with lysergically Joycean prose and narrates the tale through a human consciousness alienated (or liberated) from linear time.

This sort of science fiction does not require active collaboration on the readers' part in the suspension of disbelief. Here suspending disbelief in the Otherness of the interior and/or exterior landscape is the writer's job.

Dare I say it?

'Deed I do.

This sort of science fiction therefore generally requires a higher degree of literary skill on the part of the writer to succeed; a greater mastery of descriptive prose, a creative imagination more firmly informed, paradoxically enough, by both the limitations of the laws of mass and energy and the transcendent possibilities of the human spirit. And a more than ordinarily wide-ranging knowledge in depth of human civilizations other than the typical reader's and one's own can be a big help, too.

For, after all, there's a literary convention operating here too, namely that the alien human culture and/or alien human consciousness really *are* alien. And this one requires a certain relative ignorance on the part of the reader vis-à-vis the writer to make the tale succeed.

As I've said, a matter of degree. When it's a matter of a mutated consciousness in a contemporary setting, and you're Theodore Sturgeon or Robert A. Heinlein, you can get by with bravura writing and imaginative empathy or the ability to alienate *yourself* and think like a Man from Mars. When you're Alfred Bester taking your mutated consciousnesses through all the levels of a baroquely imagined future, it helps to be a well-traveled man of this world. When you're Brian Aldiss attempting to convey the reality of a transtemporal consciousness on a vision quest through a Europe soaked in LSD without apparently even having taken the stuff yourself, it would seem to have helped not only to have been a seasoned voyager on the Trans Europe Express but to know one's James Joyce.

Even better—though rarer—when the writer has a human civilization to mutate with which most readers are likely to be quite unfamiliar. Here, too, it's a matter of degree. Most readers will recognize *Dune* as a kind of Lawrence of Arabia in Outer Space, having seen or at least heard of the movie, but far fewer will see the extrapolations from mystical Islam and Sufism's inner core. A lot of readers will be able to recognize that Cordwainer

Smith's future universe owes much to Chinese culture, but most will be sufficiently ignorant of the fine details thereof for their sense of wonder to be evoked by Smith's extrapolative riffs thereon.

Lest this sound entirely like snotty intellectual hubris on my part, let me openly declare that a measure of my considerable enjoyment of *Flowerdust* by Gwyneth Jones rested upon my own ignorance of the very location of her arcane medium-future terrestrial setting, to the point where it took me maybe close to a hundred pages to surmise that it was probably the Malay Peninsula, and even now I'm not entirely certain that I couldn't be wrong.

If one is the sort of scholarly reader whose primary pleasure is ferreting out reference and allusion, this alienation from the real-world roots of the imaginary landscape can be annoying or even unpleasantly chastening. But if you're just along for the ride, this is the sort of ignorance that can lead to bliss.

The geographical landscape of *Flowerdust* is lushly tropical, the cityscapes exotically baroque, the psyches of the main characters operating along parameters mutated from imperatives that are not only clearly non-Western but different from those of the Islamic or Buddhist modes with which most Westerners would be more familiar, and the mix of future technological levels a crazy-quilt interpenetration of advance, decay, and jury-rigging that at least to the western mind spells the Third World.

There's a mysterious drug with psychically mutating powers, not one but a series of exotic cultures richly rendered, a powerful sense of the landscape, memorable characters operating on skewed motivations, revolution, upheaval, teeming refugee camps, a mystic rebel leader, intrusions by a for-the-most-part-off-stage higher technological culture that may or may not be a degenerate remnant of the West, a complexly plotted and fugually structured story that brings it all together in a thematically satisfying closure.

What's more, much more in fact, *Flowerdust* doesn't just surf this colorful phenomenological surface. Far from merely being an action-adventure romp through a richly exotic landscape in the manner of Jack Vance's *Big Planet* or Colin Greenland's *Bring Back Plenty, Flowerdust* is a seriously intended and successfully executed work of mature science fiction with genuine literary merit.

The alien cultures are fully and realistically realized. The social and religious structures are believable and hang together. The transcendent core has depth. The characters have credible inner lives. The story works. The novel has passion. It is well, evenly elegantly, written.

In short, *Flowerdust* marks Gwyneth Jones's emergence, without fulsome fanfare, as a major science fiction novelist. Except, that is, in Britain, where her talent has

been recognized as a preexisting condition for some time now.

The same might be said of Ian McDonald and *Evolution's Shore,* following relatively close on the heels of *Terminal Café.* McDonald lives in Belfast, meaning that he too (whether he considers himself British or Irish or a denizen of the United Kingdom) is for practical publishing purposes a British writer. He too has been around a decade or so and until recently was better known in Britain than in the United States.

And with *Terminal Café* and now *Evolution's Shore,* McDonald's emergence as a major science fiction writer also stands revealed as something that has already managed to happen without the level of noise that one might expect.

Nor are either of these fine novels any less germane to the subject at hand, for both of them deal with the confrontation of the alien and the human, albeit in markedly contrasting modes.

In *Terminal Café,* the aliens are literally us, at least in a certain physical sense, being the scientifically resurrected Dead. What is more, McDonald extrapolates the existential consequences of such a technology in a direction that I don't think I've seen before but which, once it is pointed out, seems ruthlessly and relentlessly logical.

Namely, that if the Dead can be revived once, they can be revived over and over again, meaning that this technology leads to a kind of quasi-immortality; the Dead *can* be permanently killed by doing a real thorough job on the corpus, but it ain't easy. Moreover, this technology, paradoxically, converts death into a handy-dandy form of suspended animation, ideal for long space-voyages. Die again, be resurrected at your destination, and avoid both the boredom and the resource consumption of the voyage between.

The kicker, however, is that you must first *die* to enjoy all these benefits of being Dead. And this, not surprisingly, has its subtle and not entirely positive psychological effects. Furthermore, if you really think it through as McDonald has, if the Dead have indefinitely prolonged "lifespans," their numbers will continue to grow at the expense of the living, so that space and the future will ultimately belong to them.

The Dead as the next stage in human evolution.

You have met the aliens, and you're going to become one yourself, sooner or later, whether you like it or not.

Humans can't get much more alien to themselves than that.

A point of view endorsed by the living body politic that denies the Dead their legal humanity, subjects them to indentured servitude, and confines them to "necroville" ghettos when the sun goes down.

Thus the set-up for a complex tale of love, artistic passion, revolution, and evolution. The first section is set for the most part in a beautifully detailed, well-thought-out, and convincingly realized future Southern California, richly

redolent of the Asian and Latino cultures that will surely come to dominate by the time of the story. After which, McDonald takes us deeper and deeper into the true homeland of the Dead and the evolutionary future of what the species is to become in space.

All of the above would certainly be enough to make *Terminal Café* succeed admirably on a straight extrapolative hard science fiction level, and indeed it does, but what raises it to a literary level beyond is that McDonald goes very deep beneath this surface indeed, balances the focus between the fascinating exterior phenomenology and the resulting interior landscape, up to and including the psychological and spiritual transformation that occurs when a viewpoint character passes over that ultimate existential interface between the living and the Dead.

After which, *Evolution's Shore,* though it too treats of the confrontation between the human and the alien and the transformation of the former into the latter, nevertheless comes as something totally different.

Here we have the Earth in the relatively near future, not long after the turn of the twenty-first century, clearly and recognizably the world of the reader with a few alterations, down to the brands of soft drinks and names of soccer teams and the real news networks like CNN competing with SkyNet, the fictional one that employs as a correspondent Gaby McAslan, the singular third-person viewpoint character and heroine, or at least protagonist, of the tale.

The alien has intruded in the form of a literal bolide from space that has struck the slopes of Mt. Kilimanjaro in Kenya (and others strike elsewhere in the tropics) plus strange astronomical doings in the vicinity of Saturn; changes in the albedo of Iapetus and the sudden disappearance of Hyperion, another moon of Saturn.

From the site of the Kenyan strike (and the others) spreads what becomes known as the Chaga (after a tribe in the area), a complex alien ecology expanding inexorably at the rate of fifty meters a day. Meanwhile the missing Hyperion would seem to have been cannibalized to produce a large manufactured artifact that leaves Saturnian orbit on a rendezvous course with the Earth.

In a certain sense, a set-up for an oft-told tale of alien invasion.

But Ian McDonald turns it into quite something else.

We first meet Gaby McAslan as a girl in Ireland, and the first thing we get is a descriptively powerful sense of time and place, of landscape and home. Soon we are in Kenya, where she has secured a job as a correspondent for SkyNet, and where most of the novel will be set.

I have lived long periods in Los Angeles, and in *Terminal Café,* McDonald convinced me that he had been there, that he knew the land and the weather, the flora and the fauna and the people and the pop culture, the sights, and the sounds, and the feel and the smells.

I have never been to Kenya, so for all I know it could all be high-grade bullshit, but McDonald's near-future Kenya was even more convincing that his further-future Los Angeles and for much of the same sensually descriptive reasons and telling little street-culture details.

So too the working life of Gaby and her African crew, the geo and petty politics on the ground between the UN and the Kenyans, among Kenyan gangs, among the scientists and military types and bureaucrats charged with dealing with the inexorable advance of the Chaga.

Gaby is fascinated by the Chaga, it is the Big Story of her life and something more, but she also falls in love with Kenya, with the land and the animals and the people, with all that it seems will be lost, with what the Chaga will sooner or later transform into the Other.

Gaby is also something of an ambitious and perhaps less than ethically fastidious careerist. She also falls in love with a peripatetic troubleshooting scientist, a mature love affair maturely rendered, in which his teenage sons from a previous marriage are not emotionally trivial factors. She also develops convincingly rendered friendships with a female Siberian pilot and her two-man African crew, all three of which are emotionally different and well-differentiated, quite a difficult job of writing to accomplish as well as McDonald does here.

In short, what McDonald has done is create a fully-realized and emotionally credible here and now Kenya that Gaby McAslan and the reader come to know and love, from which vantage we and she and humanity confront the Other of the Chaga.

Via the viewpoint of Gaby and through certain indirect devices such as a diary, we are taken on excursions into the Chaga itself, but interestingly enough, whether or not by design, McDonald's description of this alien realm lacks the sensual immediacy of his Kenya, frequently resorting to analogy with the familiar rather than straight description, with the characters declaring often enough that it is just too alien for *them* to apprehend in a more direct manner.

This contrast in vividness and depth of descriptive focus may serve to make us lament what is in danger of being lost, but McDonald is *not* really rewriting *The Day of the Triffids* or *The Crystal World* for the 1990s.

Without giving away too much of the story, it can be said that this is *not* really a novel about the battle to preserve the Earth from alien invasion. The plot-tension does *not* derive from the question of whether humanity will go under or prevail.

Without giving away too much of the real nature of the Chaga, which isn't so difficult since McDonald cunningly leaves us with a continuing sense of the alien by not quite doing so himself either, it can also be said that while the Chaga does indeed transform those humans who linger long within it into the Other and may in the end transform humanity itself entire, at the same time, it is trans-

forming *itself*, however fitfully, however imperfectly, its bioforms, its chemistry, its very alien nature, into modes ever-more-symbiotic to human needs and desires. Nor does McDonald really bring the actual conventional aliens—if there *are* any—on stage.

Thus, strangely and perhaps almost uniquely, what we have in *Evolution's Shore* is not exactly a novel of alien invasion, or even exactly a novel of *confrontation* between the human and the Other, but a novel of the evolutionary *dialectic* between the two.

True, the Chaga has invaded or infested the Earth without being called upon to do so, just as, come to think of it, alien Euro-American civilization and its latter day UN minions and media have invaded or infested the Kenya of the tale without exactly being invited in. True, too, the Chaga is reshaping humanity along unknown evolutionary vectors unchosen by the beneficiaries thereof.

But true too that the Chaga in the process thereof, transforms *itself* in ways beneficial to its willing and unwilling human clients—even as Gaby allows Kenya and her African friends to transform her from its and their Other into an authentic African of sorts—adapting itself to the needs of the beings and creatures of the terrestrial biosphere it is in turn evolving toward some future destiny perhaps not entirely chosen by *either* form of life.

Which is at least more than can be said for the one-way relationship between the Africa of both the tale and current reality and the Chaga of Euro-American culture.

One of the great paranoid themes of science fiction has long been that when we meet the Other we will lose our humanity as it transforms us into more of itself. One of the great utopian themes of science fiction is that when we meet the Other it will transform us into *transcendent* versions of ourselves.

Will neither turn out to be true?

And both?

Perhaps McDonald leaves the question of whether the Chaga is an instrument of alien beings we would recognize as such or its own ding an sich deliberately open. Perhaps we are meant to ponder the possibility that the Chaga itself is the Other, an Other rather different from the sort we are led to expect, stranger and more wonderful still.

Not the instrumentality of a race of alien beings, not the alien beings themselves, nor an mindless infestation by an alien biosphere, but a different and higher form of natural evolution itself; an evolution possessed, if not of consciousness or self-awareness in our human terms, not even of a self of which to be aware, then informed by a kind of caritas, an evolutionary moral will, an evolution that has somehow evolved the tropism to *care*.

It doesn't get much more alien than that out there.

Or much more close to home. ●

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

The Spring con(vention) season gets into full swing. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on clubs and fanzines, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 101 S. Whiting #700A, Alexandria VA 22304. The hot line is (703) 461-8645. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, with a musical keyboard. — Erwin S. Strauss

MARCH 1996

1-3—**ConFabulation.** For info, write: **Box 443, Bloomington IN 47402.** Or phone: **(812) 336-8238** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Bloomington IN (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Stonehenge Inn. Guests will include: Maureen McHugh, Tom Billings, Lee Billings, Dennis Tracey. SF and fantasy folksinging.

1-3—**ConSonance. (800) 866-9245.** San Jose CA. Murray Porath, Mike Rubin. SF and fantasy folksinging meet.

1-3—**JohnCon. (410) 235-5400.** On Johns Hopkins University campus, and Inn at the Colonnade, Baltimore MD.

1-3—**FiveCon. (413) 585-5557 (E-mail) 5con@smith.smith.edu.** Seelye Hall, Smith College, Northampton MA.

1-3—**AstronomiCon. (716) 342-4697. (AOL) ralston.** Radisson, Rochester NY. Rob Sawyer, Tom Kidd, Bjo Trimble.

2—**Con de 'Ville. (E-mail) galen@zansiii.millersv.edu.** Millersville Univ. of Penna., Millersville PA. 9 AM to 9 PM.

8-10—**RevelCon. (713) 526-5625.** Houston TX. Media SF and fantasy, especially British, and related fanzines.

8-10—**ConTact. (408) 475-1160.** Holiday Inn, Milpitas CA. Anthropology & SF: simulating contact with aliens.

8-10—**KatsuCon. (804) 499-4400.** Holiday Inn Executive Center, Blacksburg VA. Japanese animation & comics.

15-17—**LunaCon, Box 3566, Church St. Stn., New York NY 10008.** Hilton, Rye Brook NY. T. Pratchett, E. Friesner.

15-17—**ConAmazoo, Box 1546, Evanston IL 60204. (708) 328-8765.** Stouffer's, Battle Creek MI. Dean, Landis.

15-17—**Corflu, c/o Huntzinger, 2305 Bernard Ave., Nashville TN 37212.** Clubhouse Inn. For old-time fanzine fans.

15-17—**MadiCon, Box 7202, JMU, Harrisonburg VA 22807. (540) 434-5422.** Margaret Weis. Gaming/anime emphasis.

21-24—**AggieCon, Box J-1, MSC, College Station TX 77844. (409) 845-1515.** A & M campus. Over 3,000 expected.

22-24—**ConCept, Box 405, Stn. H, Montreal PQ H3G 2L1.** Holiday Inn Crowne Plaza. T. Pratchett, Bob Eggleton.

22-24—**CoastCon, Box 1423, Biloxi MS 39533. (601) 864-6064.** Gulf Coast Convention Center. Elizabeth Moon.

22-24—**MidSouthCon, Box 22749, Memphis TN 38122. (901) 274-7355.** Brownstone Hotel. Longyear, F. & L. Freas.

AUGUST 1996

29-Sep. 2—**L. A. Con III, Box 8442, Van Nuys CA 91409.** Anaheim CA. The 1996 World SF Convention.

AUGUST 1997

28-Sep. 1—**Lone Star Con, Box 27277, San Antonio TX 78755.** Marriotts. The 1997 World SF Convention.

AUGUST 1998

5-9—**BucConeer, Box 314, Annapolis Junction MD 20701. (E-mail) baltimore98@access.digex.net.** Baltimore MD. WorldCon.

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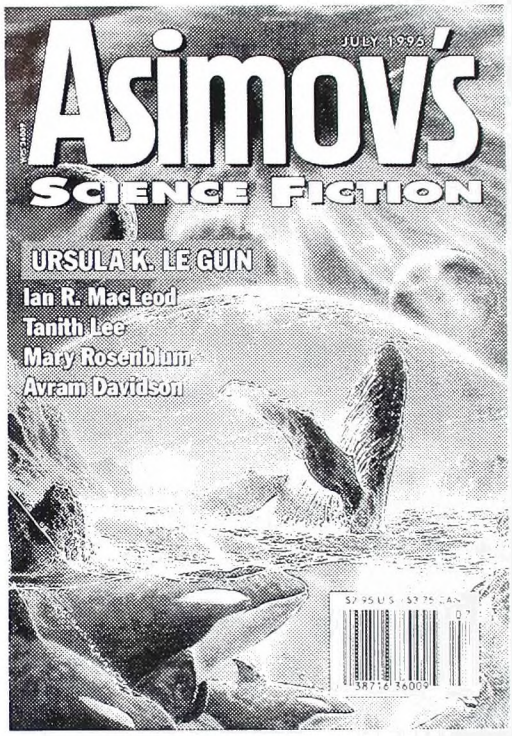

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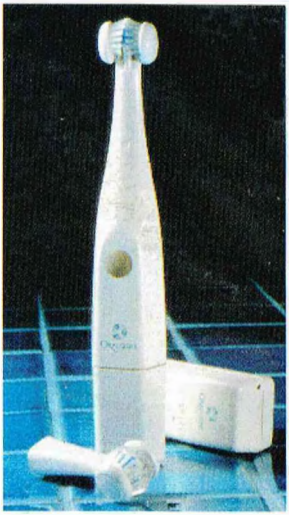

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