ISAAC ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE

DECEMBER 1984 $1.75

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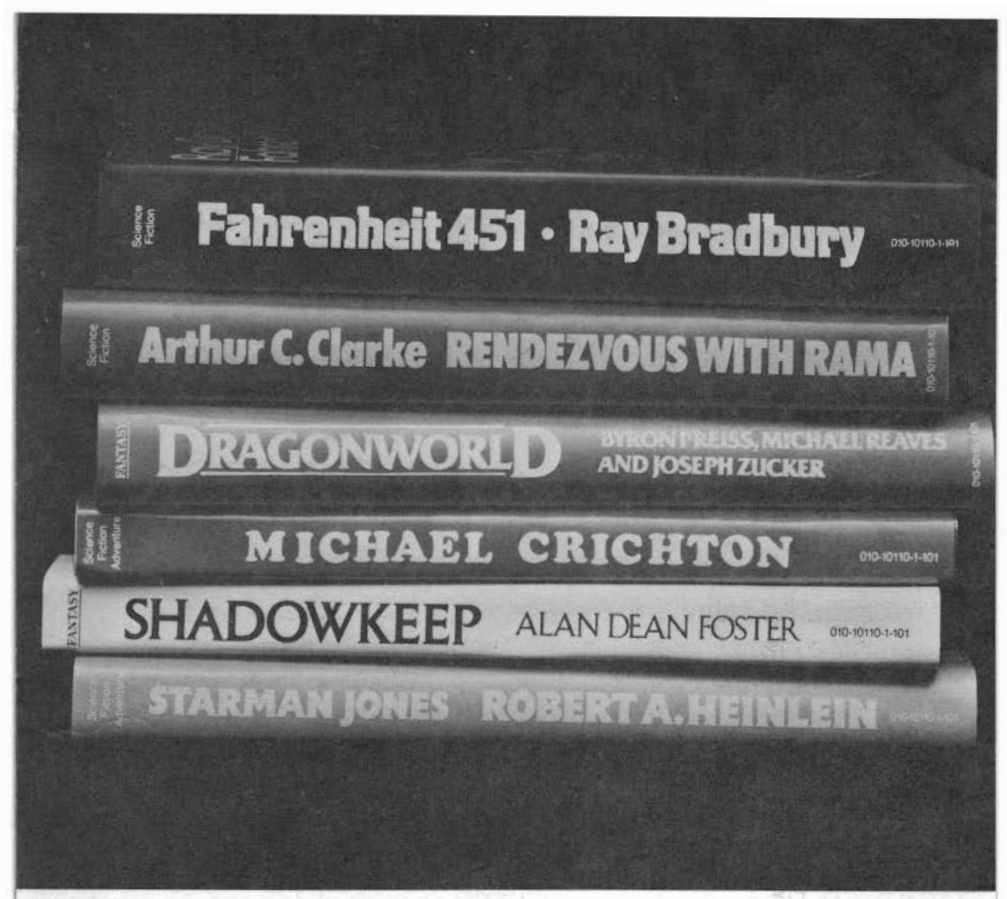

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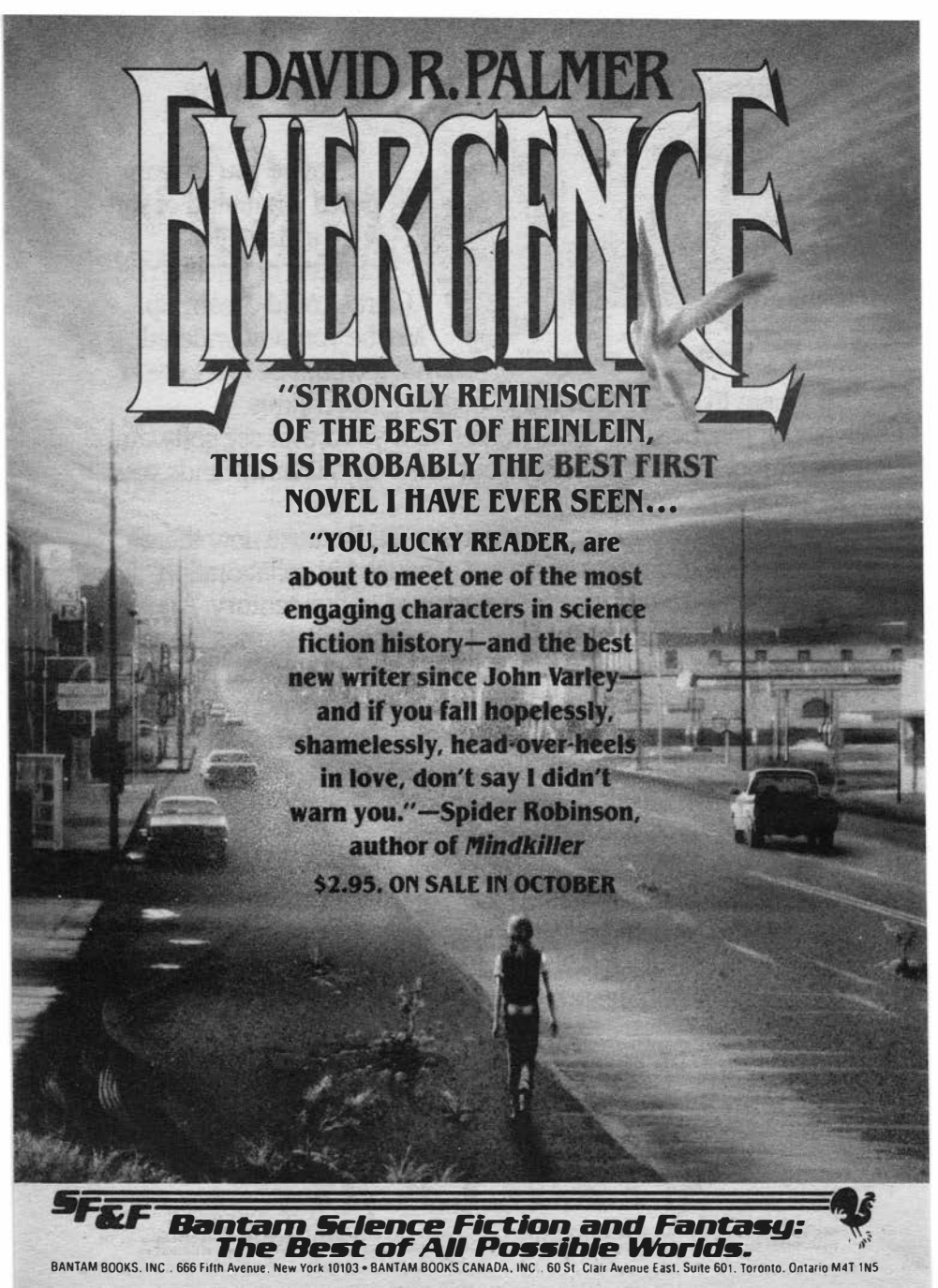
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Shawna McCarthy: Editor

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EDITORIAL

by Isaac Asimov

NAMES

We received an interesting letter some time ago from Greg Cox of Washington State. It is short and I will take the liberty of quoting its one sentence in full:

"I enjoyed very much the Good Doctor's story in the May issue ("The Evil Drink Does"), but I *have* to ask: How did a young lady from such an allegedly puritanical background end up with the unlikely (if appealing) name of *Ishtar Mistik???*"

It's a good question, but it makes an assumption. In the story, Ishtar remarks, "I was brought up in the strictest possible way. It is impossible for me to behave in anything but the most correct manner."

From that you may suppose that Ishtar's family were rigidly doctrinaire Presbyterians, or superlatively moral Catholics, or tradition-bound Orthodox Jews, but if you do it's an assumption. I say nothing about Ishtar's religious background.

To be sure, Ishtar is the Babylonian goddess of love, the analog of the Greek Aphrodite, and it is therefore odd that such a name should be given a child by puritanical parents, if the puritanism is Christian or Jewish in origin. But who says it is? The family may be a group of puritanical Druids (even Druids may have strict moral codes, and probably do) who chose "Ishtar" for its sound.

But let's go into the matter of names more systematically. Every writer has to give his characters names. There are occasional exceptions as when a writer may refer to a limited number of characters, in Puckish fashion, as "the Young Man," "the Doctor," "the Skeptic," and so on. P.G. Wodehouse, for example, in his golf stories, refers to the narrator as "the Oldest Member" and never gives him a name. He only need be referred to for a few paragraphs at the start, however, and then remains in the background as a disembodied voice. In my own George and Azazel stories, the first-person character to whom George speaks in the introduction and whom he regularly insults, has no name. He is merely "I." Of course, the perceptive reader may think (from the nature of George's insults) that I's name is Isaac Asimov, but again that is only an assumption.

Allowing for such minor exceptions then, writers need names.

You might think that this is not something that bothers anyone but apparently it does. I have received numerous letters (usually from young teenagers) who seem to be

totally unimpressed by the ease with which I work up complex plots and ingenious gimmicks and socko endings but who say, "How do you manage to decide what names to give your characters?" *That* is what puzzles them.

In my attempts to answer, I have had to think about the subject.

In popular fiction intended for wide consumption, especially among the young, names are frequently chosen for blandness. You don't want the kids to stumble over the pronunciation of strange names or to be distracted by them. Your characters, therefore, are named Jack Armstrong or Pat Reilly or Sam Jones. Such stories are filled with Bills and Franks and Joes coupled with Harpers and Andersons and Jacksons. That is also part of the comforting assumption that all decent characters, heroes especially, are of northwest European extraction.

Naturally, you may have comic characters or villains, and *they* can be drawn from among the "inferior" races, with names to suit. The villainous Mexican can be Pablo; the comic black, Rastus; the shrewd Jew, Abie; and so on.

Aside from the wearisome sameness of such things, the world changed after the 1930s. Hitler gave racism a bad name, and all over the world, people who had till then been patronized as "natives" began asserting themselves. It became necessary to choose names with a little more imagination and to avoid seeming to reserve heroism for your kind and villainy for the other kind.

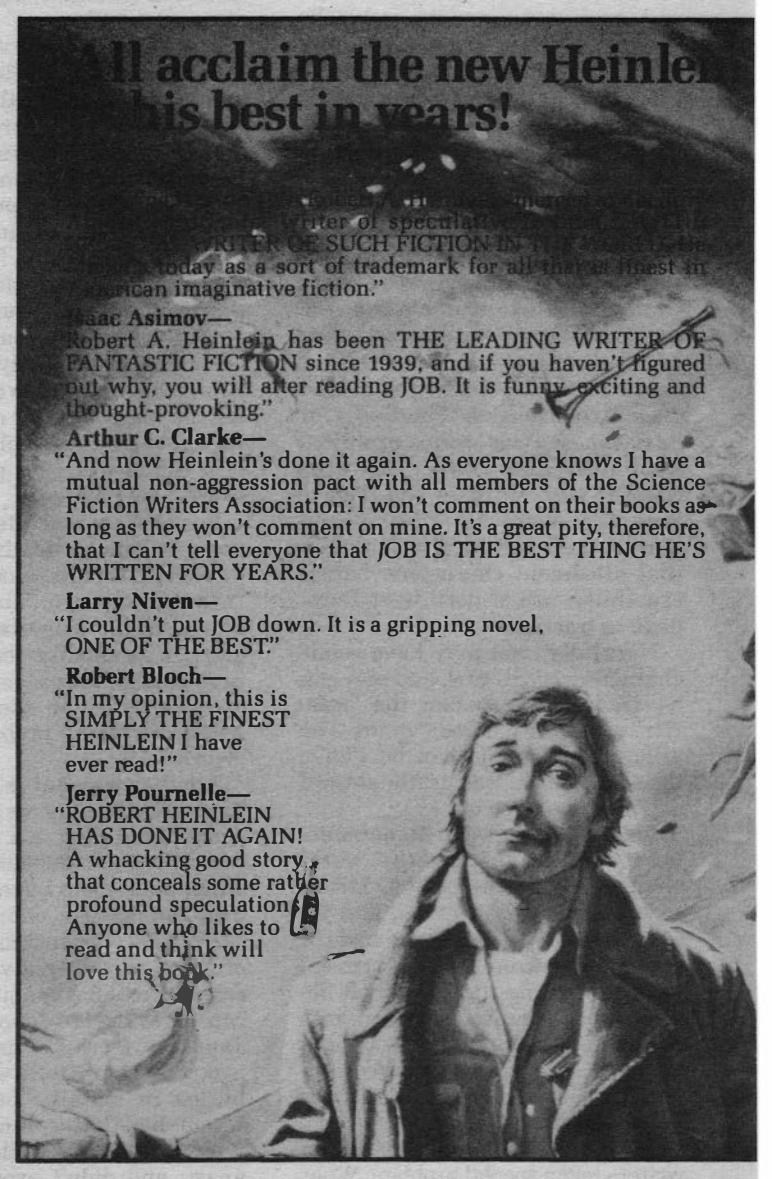
On top of this science fiction writers had a special problem. What names do you use for non-human characters—robots, extraterrestrials, and so on?

There have been a variety of solutions to this problem. For instance, you might deliberately give extraterrestrials unpronounceable names, thus indicating that they speak an utterly strange language designed for sound-producing organs other than human vocal cords. The name Xlbnushk, for instance.

That, however, is not a solution that can long be sustained. No reader is going to read a story in which he periodically encounters Xlbnushk without eventually losing his temper. After all, he has to look at the letter-combination and he's bound to try to pronounce it every time he sees it.

Besides, in real life, a difficult name is automatically simplified. In geology, there is something called "the Mohorovicic discontinuity" named for its Yugoslavian discoverer. It is usually referred to by non-Yugoslavians as "the Moho discontinuity." In the same way, Xlbnushk would probably become "Nush."

Another way out is to give non-human characters (or even human characters living in a far future in which messy emotionalism has been eliminated) codes instead of names. You can have a character called "21MM792," for instance. That sort of thing certainly gives a story a science fictional ambience. And it can work. In Neil Jones' "Professor Jameson" stories of half a century ago, the characters were organic brains in metallic bodies, all of whom had letter-number names. Eventually, one could tell them apart, and didn't even notice the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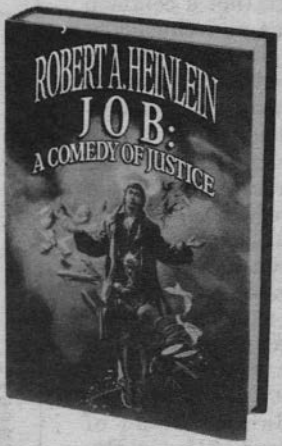

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absence of ordinary names. This system, however, will work only if it rarely occurs. If all, or even most, stories numbered their characters, there would be rebellion in the ranks.

My own system, when dealing with the far future, or with extraterrestrials, is to use names, not codes, and easily pronounceable names, too; but names that don't resemble any real ones, or any recognizable ethnic group.

For one thing that gives the impression of "alienism" without annoying the reader. For another, it minimizes the chance of offending someone by using his or her name.

This is a real danger. The most amusing example was one that was encountered by L. Sprague de Camp, when he wrote, "The Merman" back in 1938. The hero was one Vernon Brock (not a common name) and he was an icthyologist (not a common profession.) After the story appeared in the December 1938, *Astounding*, a thunderstruck Sprague heard from a real Vernon Brock who was really an ichthyologist. Fortunately, the real Brock was merely amused and didn't mind at all, but if he had been a nasty person, he might have sued. Sprague would certainly have won out, but he would have been stuck with legal fees, lost time, and much annoyance.

Sometimes I get away with slight misspellings: Baley instead of Bailey; Hari instead of Harry; Daneel insteal of Daniel. At other times, I make the names considerably different, especially the first name: Salvor Hardin, Gaal Dornick, Golan Trevize, Stor Gendibal,

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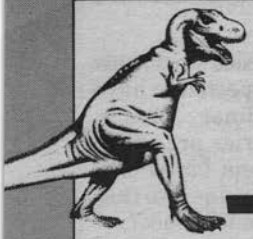

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"Blood Music"
Greg Bear
(*Analog*, June 1983)

BEST SHORT STORY
"Speech Sounds"
Octavia Butler
(*Asimov's*, Mid-December, 1983)

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Donald Tuck

BEST DRAMATIC PRESENTATION
Return of the Jedi

BEST PROFESSIONAL EDITOR
Shawna McCarthy

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Mike Glyer

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Janov Pelorat. (I hope I'm getting them right; I'm not bothering to look them up.)

My feminine characters also received that treatment, though the names I choose tend to be faintly classical because I like the sound: Callia, Artemisia, Noÿs, Arcadia, Gladia, and so on.

I must admit that when I started doing this, I expected to get irritated letters from readers, but, you know, I never got one. It began in wholesale manner in 1942 with the first *Foundation* story and in the 40-plus years since, not one such letter arrived. Well, Damon Knight once referred to Noÿs in a review of *The End of Eternity* as "the woman with the funny name," but that's as close as it got.

Which brings me to the George and Azazel stories again. There I use a different system. The George and Azazel stories are intended to be humorous. In fact, they are farces, with no attempt at or pretense of realism. The stories are outrageously overwritten on purpose. My ordinary writing style is so (deliberately) plain that every once in a while, I enjoy showing that I can be florid and rococo if I choose.

Well, then, in a rococo story, how on Earth can I be expected to have characters with ordinary names, even though the stories are set in the present and (except for Azazel) deal only with Earth people, so that I can't use non-existent names?

Instead I use real names, but choose very unusual and pretentious first names. In my George and Azazel stories, characters have been named Mordecai Sims, Gottlieb Jones, Menander Block, Hannibal West, and so on. By associating the outlandish first name with a sober last name, I heighten the oddness of the first. (On second thought, I should have made Ishtar Mistik, Ishtar Smith.)

None of this is, of course, intended as a universal rule. It's just what *I* do. If you want to write an SF story, by all means make up a system of your own. ●

LETTERS

Dear Ms. McCarthy:

Norman Spinrad made me sad
Because his last bit was so *bad!*
By 'bad', you dig, I mean all *right!*
That STREET MEAT piece was outtasight!
So I was sad—you read me now?
What's put these furrows in my brow
Is how—and when
That Spinrad cat comes back again!

or, I might get down like:

I cannot conceive of any other language whose plasticity and permutations permit simultaneous use as brush, baton, scalpel, or spade, the latter implement dirty and mud-encrusted. I cannot recall, within my own extensive reading-memory, any single author who cuts, stings, delights, and sings with the authenticity and consistency of Norman Spinrad. We pay double for *anything* in the English language down here, but I happily pay it for Dr. A's magazine. When I saw Spinrad's byline, on the Mid-Dec. issue, I would have paid triple.

One thing, Norman: En *La Idioma,* ponemos *'rr'* en el centro del perro.

But, otherwise. . .

Chuck Bush
Sto. Domingo de Herédia,
Costa Rica, Centroamérica

I'm always delighted to hear that the magazine makes its way to distant and exotic lands.

—Isaac Asimov

You'll be glad to note that Mr. Spinrad returns in this issue with another of his thoughtful and cogent book review columns.

—Shawna McCarthy

GentlePeople,

I have just received my first subscription copy, your January 1984 issue, and I want to congratulate you on starting the new year out right. The cover art was delightfully appropriate (though I had to peel off several forwarding address labels to get to it) and, if "Blued Moon" was an example of what Ms. Willis can do when her stories are not "subtly-plotted" or "understated," then I hope she continues in this unsubtle, overstated vein. I read it at 1:30 A.M. while lying in my waterbed. I was really trying to be quiet so as not to wake my husband, but my uncontrollable laughter set the bed in motion several times and I received more than one "Oh, she's reading again" look from my bleary-eyed but understanding spouse.

My congratulations are mixed with relief that the tone of the mid-

December issue was not carried into 1984. It seemed to me to be very hard-edged, pessimistic, sexually explicit and violent. My almost seven year old son, an exceptionally bright child with good taste, has shown an interest in reading Mommy's books. On occasion I've found a short short story I thought would keep his attention while continuing to foster his interest in SF. I'm hiding the mid-December issue until he's at least fifteen. I'm not saying it wasn't well-crafted, but I don't want him reading it—not yet.

While I'm at it, I might as well throw my hat into the ring with the rest of the would-be writer hordes and request your manuscript format.

Brenda Sinclair Craven
5553 West 124th Street
Hawthorne, CA 90250

Quite right. You *decide when you want your child to read something. It is wrong to abdicate that right by demanding universal censorship so that you don't have to take responsibility yourself. Some people are un-American enough to want that.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Ms. McCarthy;

Every once in a while, it's good to be behind on one's correspondence. I'd intended to write a nasty letter about the February issue. It says SCIENCE FICTION on the cover, as large as usual, but the first fiction isn't until page 30, and all of it is arguably fantasy. Overall, I've liked, admired, and approved of your editorial mix, though the proportion of features to fiction has gotten a little high, and I sympathize with the problems of inventory, but still . . .

Though "As Time Goes By" was first rate.

Then, in due course, the March issue arrived. Four memorable stories out of seven ("Cyclops," "A Surfeit of Melancholic Humours," "Galatea," and "The City of Thought and Steel") is remarkable.

Fandom can be a bit slow to take notice, but you are very close to having the best science fiction magazine, and if you are able to keep this up, you'll start collecting Hugos in two or three years.

Wishing you great success in earning them.

Neil Rest
5300 N. Clark
Chicago, IL 60640

Fandom, as you say, may be a bit slow, but we at Davis noticed it right away.

—Isaac Asimov

To the Editors:

All right, people, what's going on here? My favorite sceince fiction magazine seems to have metamorphosized into a conglomeration of unclassifiable maunderings which bear about as much resemblance to the *IAsfm* of old as a Big Mac does to a filet mignon.

This insidious degradation, as nearly as I can determine, seems to have begun in February with Gregg Keizer's "What Seen But the Wolf" and Lillian Stewart Carl's "The Rim of the Wheel." These accounted for nearly half the fiction

section, and returned absolutely nothing of value or interest, at least to this reader. I shrugged, chalked it up to a momentary aberration of perhaps my own post-influenza muddle-headedness, and began to look forward to the March edition.

And what did I get? "A Surfeit of Melacholy Humours" and "Galatea"—strange little tales which were neither science fiction nor fantasy, and which had me flipping back to the cover to reassure myself that I hadn't been sent a copy of *Pointless Publications* by mistake.

Then came April. Ah, spring. The rebirth of hope. And John Kessel's "The Big Dream," with one-third of the fiction pages again devoted to something which seemed at times to be flirting with speculative (if not *science*) fiction, but which never really crossed the fence into fields of wonder.

No, the issues were not totally disappointing. David Brin's "Cyclops" was outstanding, George Alec Effinger's "White Hats" was delightful, and the Good Doctor's "A Matter of Principle" bore (of course) the Master's touch . . . but overall, the last three issues were pretty tedious.

Have you succumbed to galloping mediocrity? Has Shawna decided to showcase "experimental" material at the expense of solid SF? If this is the new "New Wave," I think I'll turn in my surfboard. Call me when this monsoon of mediocrity has blown itself out, will you?

Grumpily,

Lynda Carraher
Umatilla, OR

Sorry, we'd like to please you, but it is my experience over a considerable number of years that, for some reason, readers tend to think that every magazine was greater "in the good old days" than it is now. *It's unsettling to think that a magazine as young as ours already has good old days.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Shawna,

As a reader (and a writer) for *ASIMOV's* almost from the very beginning, I have always enjoyed the magazine. Since you took over as editor, however, the quality of the material has risen dramatically. I'm gratified to see somebody in the field willing to take chances on something other than run-of-the-mill space adventure and thirties formula-pulp stories. Such things were fine in their time, but it seems to me that the people stories you've been running are more in the direction science fiction and fantasy should be going. Our literature has always prided itself on leading and not following and that's where *ASIMOV's* should be—on the cutting edge. Keep it up.

Steve Perry
Beaverton, OR

The credit belongs entirely to Shawna. She has guts and she knows that the price of innovation and pioneering is a certain amount of disapproval on the part of some readers.

—Isaac Asimov

Howdy:

Thank you, *IAsfm* and Lewis Shiner. I have been an avid reader

of science fiction and fantasy for the past 22 years. However, I had never read any type of SF magazine until I read your April '84 issue. Ya'll gave me a very pleasant surprise. "Twilight Time" is a wonderful novelette that really touched my finely honed paranoia. All of the material in your magazine was really enjoyable and I'm looking forward to the next issue. I know that y'all have been around a while, but I'd like to know just how long have I missed having *IAsfm* as a part of my life?

Sincerely,

Dyan Holland
1503 Rambler Rd.
Arlington, TX 76014

I'm afraid that the April 1984 issue was our 77th issue. You had therefore missed 76 issues—a veritable Golconda of delightful reading.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Shawna;

Having been a subscriber to your magazine for as long as it has been published, I feel I have a right to speak. I just finished reading the April issue. I feel let down and the situation is getting worse. The entire magazine had only one story in it that could be called Science Fiction. It was a good story and was entitled "Twilight Time." The issue had several other stories in it and they were good stories, but there were not science fiction. Shawna, please read what it says on the cover, right under the good doctor's name. If I wanted to read a murder mystery, I would buy one. Even though the other stories are good, they are not science fiction and I would rather read bad science fiction than a good murder story. Please change your editorial policies or you are going to lose a lot of your old friends.

Thank you for listening.

Edwin M. Hymas
Ogden, UT

It all depends on how you define science fiction. At least, what you consider fantasy, you admit to be good stories. Doesn't that put you ahead of the game?

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Shawna,

This letter is in reaction to those I have occasionally been reading in the letter's column which express disapproval with your editorship of the magazine. It's a well-known fact that satisfied customers do not write to express their approval with anywhere near the frequency that dissatisfied customers write to express their distaste. This unfortunate truth and the fact that you are honest enough to print such letters should not be allowed to disguise the fact that you have been doing a terrific job, that stories bought and published during your short term as editor have won both Hugo and Nebula awards, and that the magazine received seven Nebula nominations this year (not to mention a Hugo nomination for Best Editor). You must be doing *something* right. What I most dislike about these disapproving letters is the fact that many of them complain about the controversial

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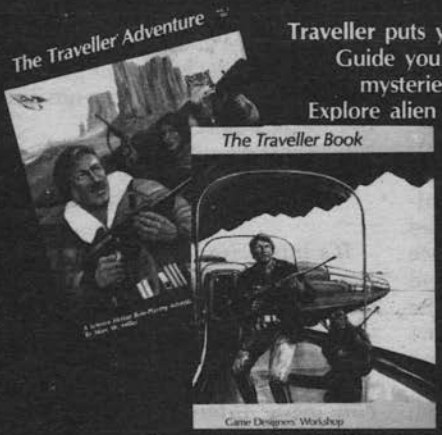

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nature of the stories and say they don't want to read stories that remind them of the real world. I'm not sure what world they're inhabiting, but if in their world there are alien intelligences inside computers, sidons in the mirrors, and so forth, then perhaps to cure their itch for science fiction they should subscribe to *Reader's Digest* and *Life*, because they're not from my home planet. They also seem to be suggesting that these stories are bad because they make them use their minds rather than blot out the world. If that's the kind of experience they want, then why read? Watch *Three's Company* instead, or become habituated to tranquilizers. I'm not saying that I've liked every story in the magazine since you've become editor, Shawna, and I, too, miss Barry Longyear (but he doesn't appear to be writing short fiction, at least none I've seen), and I have my own suggestions on how the magazine might be improved, but as long as you keep running stories like "Firewatch" and "Press Enter," well, I think I'll just keep my mouth shut and let a professional do her job.

Best,

Arthur DeVries
Daytona Beach, FL

Thank you for noticing that we've done well in the nominations this year. Among the nominees were a couple of stories that I had to defend in editorials against determined attacks by some readers. Oh, and The Robots of Dawn *has been nominated for the Hugo. I just thought I'd mention it.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

Being a newcomer to SF, and a new subscriber to *IAsfm*, I have just read, "Street Magic," by Ron Goulart in the March 1984 edition of your magazine, and found it quite an exceptional story. Becoming an immediate fan of his, I went to numerous bookstores and libraries, to read more of his terrific short stories and books, and while those books remain fresh and alive in my memory, I'd like to thank you and Ms. McCarthy for printing that story, and bringing me into the world of SF.

Sincerely,

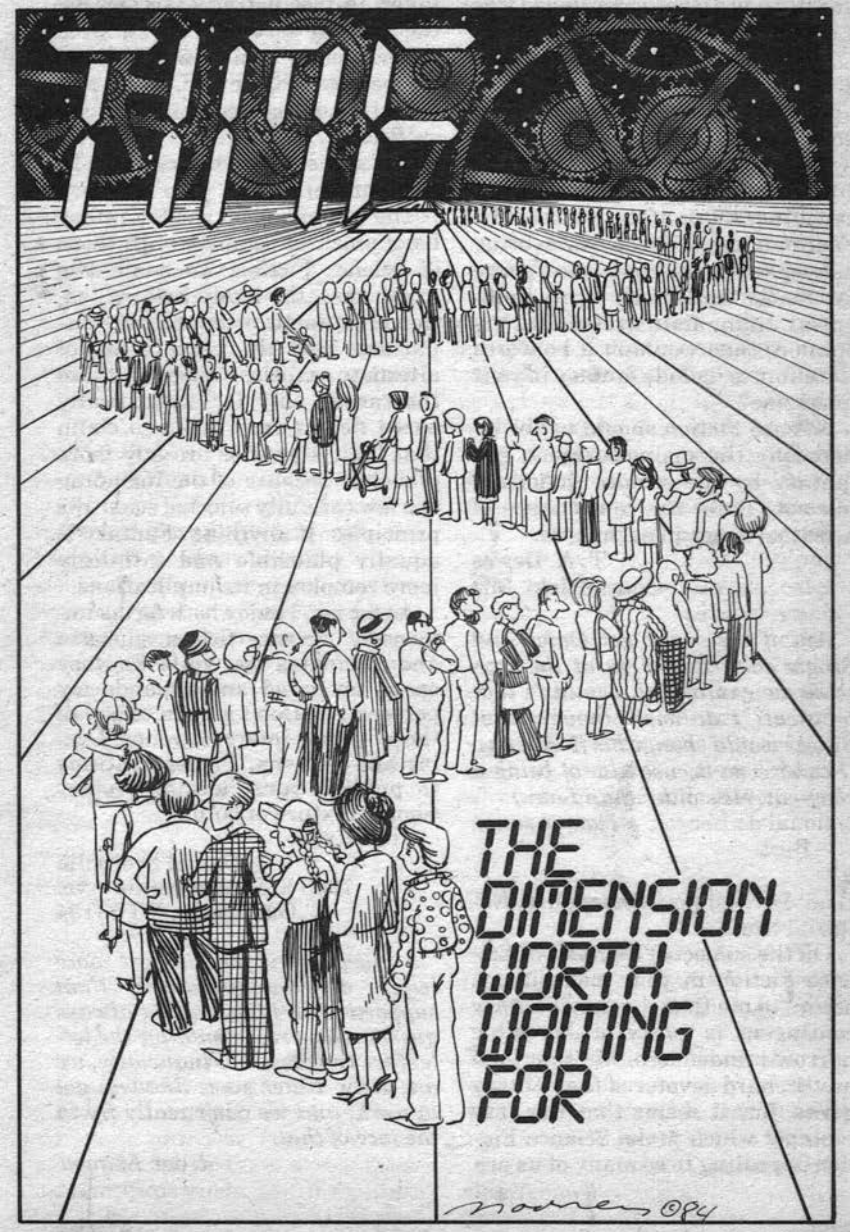
Jeffrey Holt
Los Angeles, CA

It's interesting the way one story can sometimes make a dedicated convert. I almost have the impulse (almost!) to ask everyone who was converted by a single story, to write us and tell us the name so that we can draw interesting deductions from the results.— However, don't do it. Not only do I not wish to load Shawna and Sheila with work, but what would I do if none of my stories appeared on the list?

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov and Shawna:

While watching a show on the Cable Arts network the other night, Clifton Fadiman came on with his commentary. It was about the proliferation of short stories and short story writers in a rather truncated market of which he mentioned only the *Saturday Evening Post*. He went on to read a list of twenty authors in the short story market


TIME
THE DIMENSION WORTH WAITING FOR
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and not one of those mentioned was a science fiction writer.

I bring this up because of the debate going on in your pages about the inclusion of fantasy among your magazine's stories. Now if the addition of writers such as Joyce Carol Oates or Isaac Bashevis Singer, two of the authors Mr. Fadiman mentioned, could bring more mainstream readers to a genre far better and much more influential than mainstream (in my opinion) then wouldn't it be worth the effort to include fantasy in your magazine?

Science Fiction should not be ignored by the mainstreamers, nor fantasy by the science fictioners. My vote is for the continuance of a fantasy story in each issue.

T. A. Dewes
Chesterfield, MD

Ah, if we could get Oates and Singer to write for us at the pay-scale we can afford, wouldn't that be great? I do wish, though, that Singer would change his first name. (I can't even accuse him of being a copy-cat. He's older than I am.)

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov, Shawna, & Editorial Staff,

On the subject of Fantasy vs. Science Fiction in your magazine, it occurs to me that the anti-Fantasy contingent is guilty of incredible narrow-mindedness. Not that I am any diehard devotee of the Fantasy genre, but it seems that the very concepts which make Science Fiction appealing to so many of us are taken to fascinating extremes by the Fantasy writers.

Perhaps my own view is best expressed by Arthur C. Clarke who stated, "Any science or technology sufficiently advanced is virtually indistinguishable from magic." (To paraphrase)

The elements of good Fantasy have much in common with those of Science Fiction. To name two major ones, the lively fictionalization of fantastic or improbable situations, and the exploration of alternate realities. Certainly those that argue only for scientifically based fiction can't mean to claim that their scenarios are any more plausible because of the including of a few carefully selected scientific principles. If anything, Fantasy is equally plausible and infinitely more complex in its implications.

As for me, I enjoy both forms immensely. Science fiction educates and fascinates me while Fantasy opens my mind and expands my perspective. Don't give in to any of these special interest groups, Doctor and Shawna. Please continue to publish your normal proportioned mixture of both.

Thank you,

Daniel Scerpella
7945 S. Pennsylvania Ave.
Oak Creek, WI 53154

I must admit that we get more letters denouncing fantasy than supporting it, but we must always question how representative the letters we receive are. Financially, we are doing better since Shawna got to work, and we can't really fly in the face of that.

—Isaac Asimov

GAMING

by Dana Lombardy

The winners of the awards for best new games released in 1983 were announced at this past summer's conventions. Those in the categories of science fiction and fantasy include:

H.G. Wells Awards for Excellence in Miniatures and Role-Playing

Best Fantasy/SF Figure Series: 25mm *Call of Cthulhu* by Grenadier Models Inc. (these go with Chaosium's role-playing game of the same name, based on H.P. Lovecraft's gothic horror novels).

Best Vehicular Series: 25mm fantasy *Dwarf Steam Cannon* by Ral Partha Enterprises Inc.

Best Role-Playing Rules: *James Bond, 007* by Victory Games Inc.

Best Role-Playing Adventure: *Stormhaven* by Blade/Flying Buffalo Inc. (for use with its *Mercenaries, Spies & Private Eyes* game, and *Espionage!* by Hero Games).

Charles Roberts Awards for Excellence in Boardgaming

Best Science Fiction Board Game: *Nuclear Escalation* by Blade/Flying Buffalo Inc. (an expansion module for its popular SF card game *Nuclear War*).

Best Fantasy Board Game: *Lost Worlds* combat series by Nova Game Designs Inc.

In addition, Dave Arneson, co-creator of *Dungeons & Dragons®* (which celebrates its 10th anniversary this month) was elected to the Adventure Gaming Hall of Fame.

The first releases for *Lost Worlds* were reviewed in the February, 1984 issue of *IAsfm*. This is a series of picture books, each representing a type of fantasy character, such as dwarf, goblin, amazon, skeleton, etc. In playing the game, each player first selects a character/book that represents his *opponent*. That is, if you're going to fight the skeleton, you'd use the book that shows what the character looks like as he fights you.

Each book is 36 pages long, with 32 different illustrations of a character in a variety of poses: defending, charging, wounded, hitting you, being hit by you, parrying, thrusting, etc. Accompanying each illustration are notes on points scored if you hit him, plus a code at the bottom of the page which you select from to make a specific maneuver.

Maneuvers are listed on a separate, color-coded card: down swing, side swing, thrust, fake, protected attack, shield block, jump, and four special maneuvers, such as kick. There are also 8 long-range maneuvers listed for a total of 31 different things you can do while fighting an opponent. You may not be able to do all these maneuvers every turn, because a previous maneuver may have put you out of position.

You and your opponent simultaneously select maneuvers and call out a

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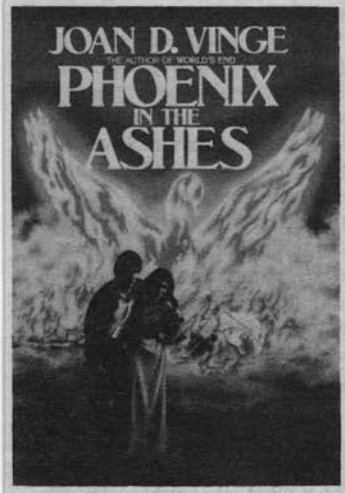

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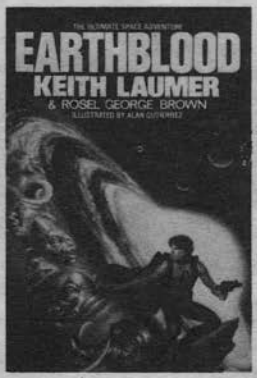

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number that, when cross-referenced, sends you to a new page for the current position of your opponent. It's possible for you to get behind him, or for him to disappear from your view and get behind *you*.

The two of you continue to select maneuvers and call out numbers until one of you has been hit enough times to lose the game. Depending on the players, this could happen quickly or take time as you carefully parry and thrust at one another.

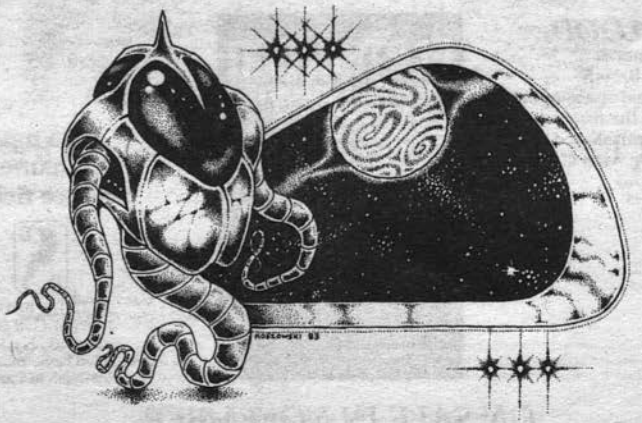
The character/books available include: *Man in Chainmail with Sword and Shield; Skeleton with Scimitar and Shield; Dwarf in Chainmail with Two-Handed Axe; Giant Goblin with Mace and Shield; Woman in Chainmail with Sword and Shield; Hill Troll with Club; Barbarian with Two-Handed Sword; Fighter Mage with Magic Sword;* and *Wraith with Sickle*. Each book is $5.95 at your local store (or direct from Nova Game Designs Inc., Box 1178, Manchester, CT 06040).

Nuclear Escalation is a card game that can be played as is, or in conjunction with Blade's *Nuclear War* card game ($12.95 for either game at your local store, or direct from Box 1467, Scottsdale, AZ 85252).

Nuclear War was originally designed in the Cold War 1960's, and is for gamers who have a macabre sense of humor. To get an idea of what the game is about, consider "The Day Before" tournament staged last April. The purpose of this parody world demolition derby was to start a nuclear war and be the last team to have any population remaining. The tournament was held in several stores across country, with teams indicating their moves and results via computer terminal. The game ended in a draw—everyone was killed.

The "humor" in the game consists of items such as "super germ" which is produced by your scientists. Unfortunately, if it leaks out you lose 25 million people. Good thing you start with at least 100 million population!

If you're not offended by a serious subject being treated humorously, maybe you know a friend in the nuclear freeze movement who'd just love to get a copy of *Nuclear War* or *Nuclear Escalation*. By the way, the games really *are* fun to play.●



DANA LOMBARDY

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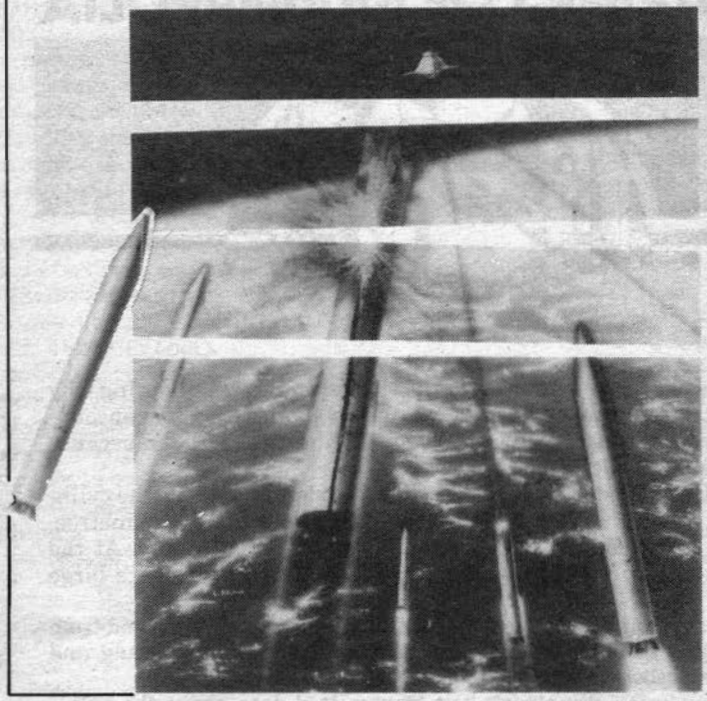

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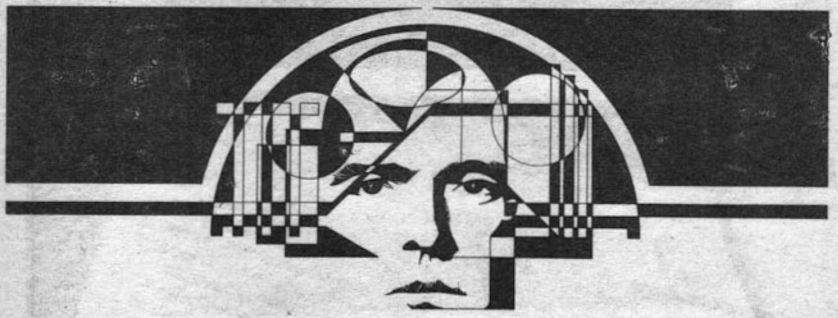
MARTIN GARDNER

THE BARBERS OF BARBERPOLIA



Four issues ago we left the crew of the spaceship *Bagel* wondering why a dark red stripe spiraled around a cylindrical planet they had encountered. The crew had named the mysterious planet *Barberpolia* because it rotated like a barber's pole.

After the Bagel's home base granted permission to explore the cylindrical object, Captain Larc Snaag, and his exobiologist Stanley Winetree, took off in a small shuttle ship. They circled the planet warily. At the center of its smooth metallic surface was what appeared to be a large entrance.

When the ship landed, three humanoids in space suits emerged from the opening and gave what seemed to be friendly greetings. Snaag and Winetree were escorted inside.

Sensory devices on Winetree's belt transmitted data about the cylinder's atmosphere to VOZ, the Bagel's supercomputer. The air was similar to that on Earth, VOZ relayed back, and could be breathed with safety. Snaag, Winetree, and the three Barberpolians took off their helmets.

The faces of the natives were entirely covered with short reddish hair. Otherwise they looked remarkably human except for their smaller eyes, flatter noses, and wider mouths. Snaag and Winetree could hardly believe their ears when one of the natives called out, in curiously accented but recognizable English, "Welcome, men of Earth, to our planet!"

For several weeks Snaag and Winetree were lavishly entertained. The cylindrical planet, which rotated to generate a gravity field, had been constructed by a culture with a technology on roughly the same level as

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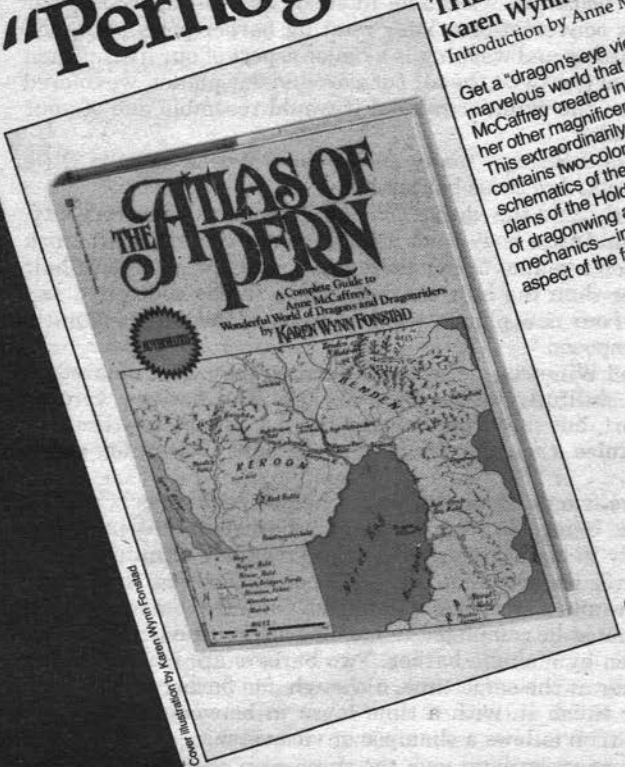

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Earth's. The natives had formerly occupied a nearby planet, but when nuclear warfare had rendered the surface uninhabitable, the survivors found it necessary to build the artificial planet. It was in orbit around a small black hole which was used both as a source of energy and for waste disposal. The helical stripe? It was an enormous tube that carried atmosphere from huge machines at the ends of the cylinder to all parts of the planet.

A century before the cylinder was built, a group of Barberpolians had visited the Earth. They came, they told Snaag and Winetree, in dish-like ships. Apparently those ships had been responsible for the UFO mania that swept the Earth in the latter part of the twentieth century.

"We were extremely careful to avoid all interactions with humans," said one of the Barberpolians who had learned English, "but after several decades of observations we mastered the English language well enough to read the many books we were able to steal, and to understand our recordings of your conversations. Your rotating barber poles intrigued us because hair cutting and washing is a major aspect of our lives. When we found it necessary to twist the air tube around our planet, we colored it red so that when the cylinder rotated it would resemble one of your beautiful barber poles."

"I've noticed," said Snaag, "many such poles rotating outside little shops on your streets. Are those barbershops?"

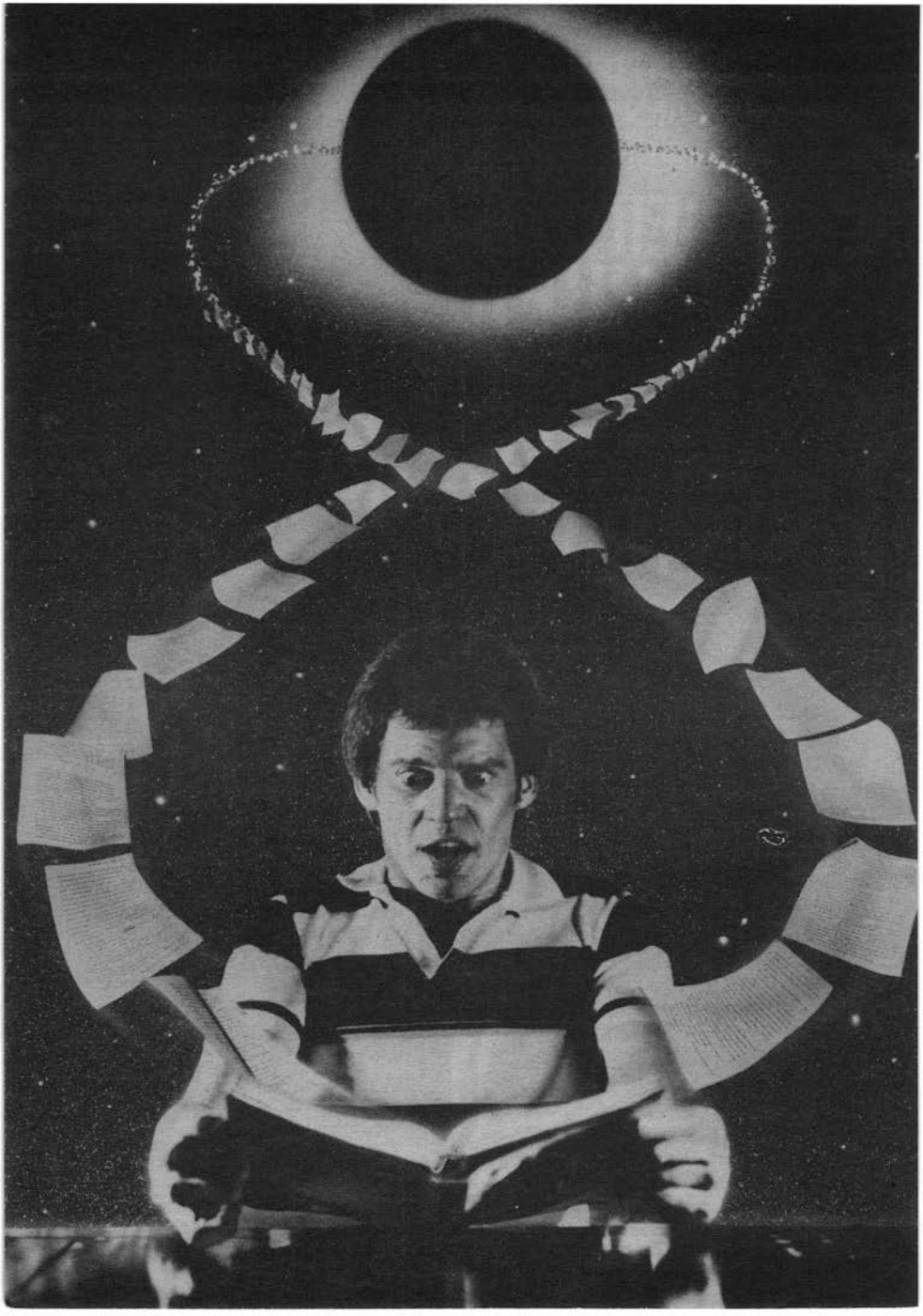
"They are indeed," said the native. "We have thousands in every city. As you can see, our entire body from head to toes is covered with thick hair. We evolved on a planet colder than yours, and our protective hair grows much faster than the hair on your heads. In the controlled and warmer climate of our new planet, we need to have our hair constantly trimmed and shampooed."

When Snaag and Winetree visited a barbershop they were amazed by how rapidly and skillfully the barbers worked. The natives wore no clothing of any sort, but their hair covered them so completely that the only way to recognize a female was by a small bald spot on top of her head.

All barbers were female. Sometimes they helped each other when the shop was crowded. Using electrical clippers, a barber could trim a customer's entire body in ten minutes. A shampoo took five minutes.

Assume that three Barberpolian men, A, B, and C, enter a shop at the same time. Each wants a trim and a shampoo. Only two barbers are on duty. A shampoo must be completed in one unbroken time period of five minutes, and given by a single barber. Two barbers are not allowed to work on a customer at the same time, although one barber may start a trim and another finish it, with a time lapse in between. It does not matter whether a trim follows a shampoo or vice versa.

How quickly can two barbers give the three men their haircuts and shampoos? If you find this combinatorial problem too confusing, the answer is on page 62.



An editor is one who separates the wheat from the chaff, and prints the chaff.

—Adlai Stevenson

VIEWPOINT

IN SEARCH OF SURPRISES

by Charles Platt

art: J. K. Potter

The author's most recent works include *Dream Makers II* (Berkley) and *The Whole-Truth Home Computer Handbook* (Avon), a satirical look at computers. He is also a regular columnist for *Science Fiction Review* and he has made some lively contributions to our own pages. Mr. Platt returns now with an interesting look at the fiction that appears in *IAsfm* and how that fiction affects you, the reader.

What do you want to read? You, scanning these lines, wondering whether you should bother with this article, or skip to one of the stories, or toss the magazine aside. What do you *really* want to read?

This is supposed to be the number-one question in any editor's mind. An editor, after all, needs to publish stories that as

VIEWPOINT

many people as possible will enjoy. This way, the circulation of the magazine will increase, the publishing company will make more money, and the editor will take the credit.

But figuring out the tastes of readers is a frustrating kind of guessing game. All too often, an editor thinks: "I like this story, but it's different from what we usually publish, and it isn't an easy read. Will readers put up with strange stuff like this?"

Or, perhaps more often: "This one isn't a very deep story, but the readers probably want more action and adventure, so maybe I should run it anyway—even though I don't like it much myself."

I'm generalizing, of course, and I'm not saying that this is exactly what happens at *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*. This is simply the kind of talk I have heard from many different magazine and book editors in the science-fiction field, on various occasions.

It sounds like a hit-and-miss system, and it is. Wouldn't it be better to do some proper market research, and find out, once and for all, what readers really want? This way, the "number-one question" could be answered conclusively.

Personally, I don't think market research should ever be used in this way. Even if a magazine could afford to poll every reader, and tabulate everyone's tastes, I still don't think this would be very useful—because I'm willing to bet that most of you wouldn't actually *know* what you want to read in the next issue of this magazine.

Yes, I realize, this sounds like an insulting thing to say. Some of you already take the trouble to voice your preferences. You write letters emphasizing which stories you like and don't like. Lately, for instance, some of you have been complaining that there's "too much fantasy" in *Asimov's* magazine, and "not enough real science fiction."

The number of people who bother to write letters to the editor is always small, compared with the majority of readers who never respond. But let's suppose that in this case the minority really does represent the views of the majority. If this is so, shouldn't Ms. McCarthy realign the policy of the magazine to suit people's demands?

I think not. Because, I repeat, I truly do not believe that you

know what you will want to read in months to come. And if you insist that you *do too* know what you like, I *still* say you may well be wrong.

I'm not being condescending. I include myself in this. No matter what I may pretend, I don't know exactly what I'll want to read, either.

To explain further, I must backtrack.

Most people begin reading science fiction, if they are going to begin at all, in their teenage years. That certainly applied to me; I got through about a thousand science-fiction novels between the ages of fifteen and nineteen, and I read almost nothing else.

During this period I was a kind of literary snob. I refused even to look at a novel if it wasn't science fiction. When I was occasionally forced to read general, "mainstream" fiction, for school work or to please my parents, who couldn't understand the narrowness of my literary obsession, I approached the stories and novels in such a prejudiced frame of mind that there was no way I could enjoy them.

This was defensive behavior on my part. There were subtleties in the mainstream literature that I frankly didn't understand. The stories didn't seem to have proper endings. The plots "didn't make sense." In science fiction, plots were much more concrete: there was usually a hero with a problem at the beginning of the story, and he solved it at the end. He had to escape, or unravel a mystery on an alien world, or conquer the universe, or save his buddies or his girlfriend from some kind of trouble.

These plots were merely a means to an end, however. The really important element was always *the idea.*

Science fiction is unique in that it is primarily a literature of concepts. If the concept isn't fresh, the story is usually a failure. The same is not true in other categories, where character can be more important than concept. In a mystery, for instance, it is nice to have a new twist of some kind, somewhere in the plot, but it's not essential. If the writer can come up with a truly memorable character for the detective or the villain, that can outweigh other considerations.

People expect different things from different categories of fiction. As a teenager, I expected ideas, adventure, action, and a

straightforward style and plot, with simple motivations. That was what I thought I wanted to read.

In the long run, however, I was wrong.

It took me a long time to discover this, and I might never have discovered it at all had I not met a bunch of people whose tastes were broader than mine.

In the mid-1960s, I moved to London from the small English town where I grew up. I was starting to write science-fiction stories, and was submitting them to the only British science-fiction magazine at the time: *New Worlds*.

By coincidence, there was a change of editors just before I moved to London. By another coincidence, the new editor, Michael Moorcock, lived two blocks from my new home. This made it convenient for us to meet, and for me to start working, part-time, on his magazine. The result was a series of revelations.

Moorcock had read as much science fiction as I had, but, being a few years older and more open-minded, he'd also read a lot of other modern literature. He explained, patiently and condescendingly, that there were writers outside of science fiction who were just as imaginative and stimulating; and I was missing something by restricting my tastes. The first sample he gave me was *The Naked Lunch* by William Burroughs.

Now, this wasn't school work, and it wasn't some stuffy or ancient volume recommended by my parents. It was a modern, avant-garde book given to me by an editor to whom I was trying to sell stories. So I had a great incentive to read it—*really* read it.

It was a startling experience. Burroughs used a few science-fiction images here and there—Venusians, people turning into reptiles, all kinds of surreal stuff. In that respect, his work seemed vaguely familiar to me. On the other hand, it went way beyond anything ever published as science fiction. It was erotic, it was decadent, and it even experimented with the way in which the words were put together. Some parts of the text had been cut up and arbitrarily spliced into other material, like pieces of an artist's collage.

As a science-fiction fan, I had always claimed that, ideally, I wanted fiction full of new ideas and surprises. Well, I had to

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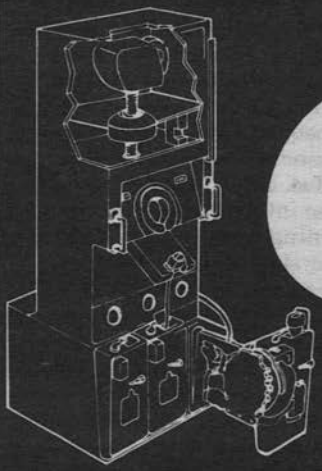

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admit, William Burroughs was surprising.

From there, I broadened my reading interests in all directions. Kosinski, Borges, Pynchon—any novelist who was pushing the boundaries of fiction a little bit. I began to realize how much more mature these "outsiders" were, and how much more advanced they were as stylilsts, even if their books were more mannered and difficult to get through, and lacked the old "sense of wonder" of science fiction.

Meanwhile, at the same time, I was doing more work for *New Worlds* magazine, and it was radically changing its policy. Its scope was broadening in exactly the same way that my own personal tastes were changing. Under Moorcock's control, it published fiction that moved gradually away from the usual science-fiction action-adventure formula, toward literary experiments that were in progress outside the field (and had, in fact, been in progress for many years).

The readers rebelled. We received a lot of mail complaining that this new stuff wasn't what they wanted to read, because it wasn't "real science fiction."

We paid no attention. I, for one, had had it proved to me that I *could too* enjoy a wider range of fiction, if I would simply give it a chance. I began to find, in fact, that when I read "ordinary" science fiction, it no longer seemed so interesting. It wasn't really experimenting very much, and some of the ideas weren't really new at all—they were merely permutations of ideas that had been used before. And none of it was very relevant to human beings in everyday life.

New Worlds became a truly avant-garde publication, and barely managed to maintain its national circulation and monthly schedule. Abusive letters kept coming in. But also we started receiving a different kind of mail, from people who found the magazine a fresh, welcome stimulus. Some of these readers were so interested in what was happening, they started writing similar stories themselves.

The result, ultimately, was the so-called New Wave in science fiction, which was promoted on this side of the Atlantic by people such as Harlan Ellison, Thomas M. Disch, Norman Spinrad—and myself, for by this time I had moved to New York and was an editorial adviser for Avon Books.

The New Wave has been

chronicled elsewhere. Like any literary movement, it died; but while it lasted, it opened the science-fiction field to new techniques and ideas. Today, *New Worlds* has long since ceased publication, and a different British magazine, *Interzone,* is trying to pursue a vaguely similar policy. Its title, incidentally, happens to be derived from *The Naked Lunch.*

Meanwhile, here at *Asimov's* magazine, it seems to me that the fiction follows a kind of middle path: it isn't wildly experimental, but it does emphasize character as well as concept, and it doesn't always rely on action and adventure. Science has a place here, but so does fantasy—not fantasy involving swords and sorcery, but fantasy of the kind where the writer says, "Yes, I know this isn't necessarily logical, or even possible; but wouldn't it be interesting to imagine if. . ." And the story fills in the rest of that sentence.

The moral of all this ought to be obvious. First, as I have experienced myself, people can be wrong about what they think they want to read. If the circumstances are right, and if you're willing to be adventurous, you can discover whole new areas of fiction that are more interesting than the books and stories you currently enjoy.

Second, suppose Michael Moorcock had listened to his readers, had backed away from literary experiments, and had stuck with the old kind of science fiction. We would have lost a whole new generation of writers, and a whole new direction.

Of course, *New Worlds* magazine might have stayed in business a bit longer if it had remained more conservative. There is often a larger audience for familiar material than for something radically new.

And yet, in the end, people do become bored with the same old stuff, and no category of fiction can survive if it doesn't change at least a little bit. Science fiction was getting stale in the early 1960s; it needed a radical infuence to shake it up, to keep it healthy.

So, on the one hand, an editor generally does want to please you, the reader, and cater to your tastes. But on the other hand, it's a mistake to make this the entire editorial policy. Just look what happens in other media that take this principle to its logical conclusion, and *always* try to give people *exactly* what they want. In

television, producers rely on elaborate market research methods to guide them in selecting (or even rejecting) programs. The result? Almost everyone agrees that too much of television is boring and predictable. Even diehard TV addicts get tired of it; but producers and writers are reluctant to try anything really new, because there's no guarantee that anyone will like it. No one takes risks, and the medium stagnates.

The situation is almost as bad in Hollywood. Any successful movie is imitated, repeatedly, till there's no life left in the idea. Fortunately, a few people have enough nerve and influence to push through an occasional new idea; and, ironically, these are the projects that have the potential to make infinitely more money than the exploitation movies that "give the public what they want." *Star Wars,* for instance, was a gamble; there was no way that market research could have predicted its success, because nothing exactly like it had been done before. Until people actually saw the movie, they couldn't possibly say whether they enjoyed this kind of thing.

It would be a terrible mistake to edit this magazine in the way that television is produced, by taking polls and carefully giving you only the kind of stories that you've enjoyed in the past. It would be a mistake even to follow the Hollywood strategy, and publish a dozen sequels and imitations for each story that dares to be different.

As science-fiction readers, more than any other audience, we expect to be surprised. We are interested in the future, other worlds, other forms of perception. That's how I feel about it, anyway. I don't want to read exactly the same kind of thing that I read last month; that's not what science fiction is about. I consider repetition and sameness an insult to my intelligence.

I have no influence over the editorial policy here. I'm merely expressing my views in this column, and Ms. McCarthy will do whatever she thinks is best. But personally, I hope that she'll avoid the simple plots, fast action, and straightforward storytelling that we're already familiar with in science fiction. I hope she'll continue to present us with stories that aim to be a little bit different. As a science-fiction reader, I say: Don't necessarily give me what I think I want. Surprise me. ●

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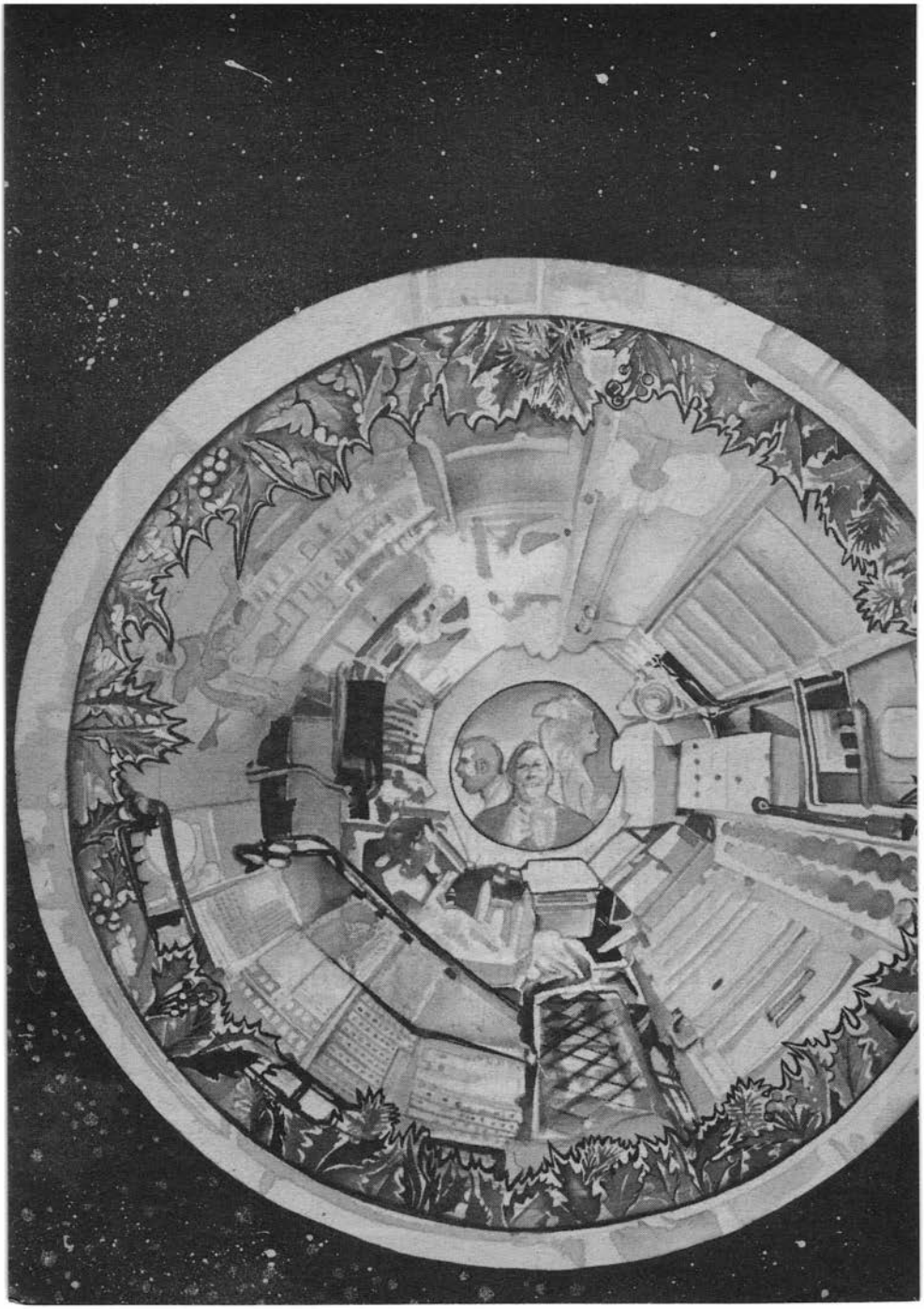

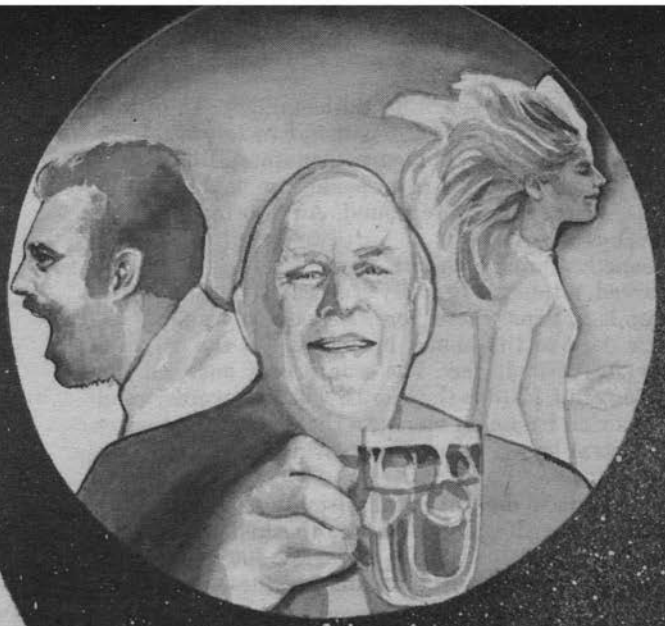

by Jack McDevitt

PROMISES TO KEEP

What is the spirit that moves us to explore the unknown? Is it strong enough to keep us interested in the space program, especially when what we see through the TV camera may not be as dramatic as what we can see at the movies? "Promises to Keep," set in the same universe as "Melville on Iapetus" (November 1983), takes a thoughtful look at these questions.

art: Val Lakey Lindahn

I received a Christmas card last week from Ed Iseminger. The illustration was a rendering of the celebrated Christmas Eve telecast from Callisto: a lander stands serenely on a rubble-strewn plain, spilling warm yellow light through its windows. Needle-point peaks rise behind it, and the rim of a crater curves across the foreground. An enormous belted crescent dominates the sky.

In one window, someone has hung a wreath.

It is a moment preserved, a tableau literally created by Cathie Perth, extracted from her prop bag. Somewhere here, locked away among insurance papers and the deed to the house, is the tape of the original telecast, but I've never played it. In fact, I've seen it only once, on the night of the transmission. But I know the words, Cathie's words, read by Victor Landolfi in his rich baritone, blending the timeless values of the season with the spectral snows of another world. They appear in schoolbooks now, and on marble.

Inside the card, in large, block, defiant letters, Iseminger had printed "SEPTEMBER!" It is a word with which he hopes to conquer a world. Sometimes, at night, when the snow sparkles under the hard cold stars (the way it did on Callisto), I think about him, and his quest. And I am very afraid.

I can almost see Cathie's footprints on the frozen surface. It was a good time, and I wish there were a way to step into the picture, to toast the holidays once more with Victor Landolfi, to hold onto Cathie Perth (and not let go!), and somehow to save us all. It was the end of innocence, a final meeting place for old friends.

We made the Christmas tape over a period of about five days. Cathie took literally hours of visuals, but Callisto is a place of rock and ice and deadening sameness: there is little to soften the effect of cosmic indifference. Which is why all those shots of towering peaks and tumbled boulders were taken at long range, and in half-light. Things not quite seen, she said, are always charming.

Her biggest problem had been persuading Landolfi to do the voice-over. Victor was tall, lean, ascetic. He was equipped with laser eyes and a huge black mustache. His world was built solely of subatomic particles, and driven by electromagnetics. Those who did not share his passions excited his contempt; which meant that he understood the utility of Cathie's public relations function at the same time that he deplored its necessity. To participate was to compromise one's integrity. His sense of delicacy, however, prevented his expressing that view to Cathie: he begged off rather on the press of time, winked apologetically, and straightened his mustache. "Sawyer will read it for you," he said, waving me impatiently into the conversation.

Cathie sneered, and stared irritably out a window (it was the one with the wreath) at Jupiter, heavy in the fragile sky. We knew, by then, that it had a definable surface, that the big planet was a world sea of liquid hydrogen, wrapped around a rocky core. "It must be frustrating," she

said, "to know you'll never see it." Her tone was casual, almost frivolous, but Landolfi was not easily baited.

"Do you really think," he asked, with the patience of the superior being (Landolfi had no illusions about his capabilities), "that these little pieces of theater will make any difference? Yes, Catherine, of course it's frustrating. Especially when one realizes that we have the technology to put vehicles down there. . . ."

"And scoop out some hydrogen," Cathie added.

He shrugged. "It may happen someday."

"Victor, it never will if we don't sell the Program. This is the last shot. These ships are old, and nobody's going to build any new ones. Unless things change radically at home."

Landolfi closed his eyes. I knew what he was thinking: Cathie Perth was an outsider, an ex-television journalist who had probably slept her way on board. She played bridge, knew the film library by heart, read John Donne (for style, she said), and showed no interest whatever in the scientific accomplishments of the mission. We'd made far-reaching discoveries in the fields of plate tectonics, planetary climatology, and a dozen other disciplines. We'd narrowed the creation date down inside a range of a few million years. And we finally understood how it had happened! But Cathie's televised reports had de-emphasized the implications, and virtually ignored the mechanics of such things. Instead, while a global audience watched, Marjorie Aubuchon peered inspirationally out of a cargo lock at Ganymede (much in the fashion that Cortez must have looked at the Pacific on that first bright morning), her shoulder flag patch resplendent in the sunlight. And while the camera moved in for a close-up (her features were illuminated by a lamp Cathie had placed for the occasion in her helmet), Herman Selma solemnly intoned Cathie's comments on breaking the umbilical.

That was her style: brooding alien vistas reduced to human terms. In one of her best-known sequences, there had been no narration whatever: two spacesuited figures, obviously male and female, stood together in the shadow of the monumental Cadmus Ice Fracture on Europa, beneath three moons.

"Cathie," Landolfi said, with his eyes still shut, "I don't wish to be offensive: but do you really care? For the Program, that is? When we get home, you will write a book, you will be famous, you will be at the top of your profession. Are you really concerned with where the Program will be in twenty years?"

It was a fair question: Cathie'd made no secret of her hopes for a Pulitzer. And she stood to get it, no matter what happened after this mission. Moreover, although she'd tried to conceal her opinions, we'd been together a long time by then, almost three years, and we could hardly misunderstand the dark view she took of people who voluntarily imprisoned themselves for substantial portions of their lives to go 'rock-collecting.'

"No," she said. "I'm not, because there won't be a Program in twenty years." She looked around at each of us, weighing the effect of her words. Iseminger, a blond giant with a reddish beard, allowed a smile of lazy tolerance to soften his granite features. "We're in the same class as the pyramids," she continued, in a tone that was unemotional and irritatingly condescending. "We're a hell of an expensive operation, and for what? Do you think the taxpayers give a good goddam about the weather on Jupiter? There's nothing out here but gas and boulders. Playthings for eggheads!"

I sat and thought about it while she smiled sweetly, and Victor smoldered. I had not heard the solar system ever before described in quite those terms; I'd heard people call it *vast*, *awesome*, *magnificent*, *serene*, stuff like that. But never *boring*.

In the end, Landolfi read his lines. He did it, he said, to end the distraction.

Cathie was clearly pleased with the result. She spent three days editing the tapes, commenting frequently (and with good-natured malice) on the *resonance* and *tonal qualities* of the voice-over. She finished on the morning of the 24th (ship time, of course), and transmitted the report to *Greenswallow* for relay to Houston. "It'll make the evening newscasts," she said with satisfaction.

It was our third Christmas out. Except for a couple of experiments-in-progress, we were finished on Callisto and, in fact, in the Jovian system. Everybody was feeling good about that, and we passed an uneventful afternoon, playing bridge and talking about what we'd do when we got back. (Cathie had described a deserted beach near Tillamook, Oregon, where she'd grown up. "It would be nice to walk on it again, under a *blue* sky," she said. Landolfi had startled everyone at that point: he looked up from the computer console at which he'd been working, and his eyes grew very distant. "I think," he said, "when the time comes, I would like very much to walk with you. . . . ")

For the most part, Victor kept busy that afternoon with his hobby: he was designing a fusion engine that would be capable, he thought, of carrying ships to Jupiter within a few weeks, and, possibly, would eventually open the stars to direct exploration. But I watched him: he turned away periodically from the display screen, to glance at Cathie. Yes (I thought), she would indeed be lovely against the rocks and the spume, her black hair free in the wind.

Just before dinner, we watched the transmission of Cathie's tape. It was very strong, and when it was finished we sat silently looking at one another. By then, Herman Selma and Esther Crowley had joined us. (Although two landers were down, Cathie had been careful to give the impression in her report that there had only been one. When I asked why, she said, "In a place like this, one lander is the Spirit of Man. Two landers is just two landers.") We toasted Victor, and we toasted Cathie.

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Almost everyone, it turned out, had brought down a bottle for the occasion. We sang and laughed, and somebody turned up the music. We'd long since discovered the effect of low-gravity dancing in cramped quarters, and I guess we made the most of it.

Marj Aubuchon, overhead in the linkup, called to wish us season's greetings, and called again later to tell us that the telecast, according to Houston, had been "well-received." That was government talk, of course, and it meant only that no one in authority could find anything to object to. Actually, somebody high up had considerable confidence in her: in order to promote the illusion of spontaneity, the tapes were being broadcast directly to the commercial networks..

Cathie, who by then had had a little too much to drink, gloated openly. "It's the best we've done," she said. "Nobody'll ever do it better."

We shared that sentiment. Landolfi raised his glass, winked at Cathie, and drained it.

We had to cut the evening short, because a lander's life-support system isn't designed to handle six people. (For that matter, neither was an Athena's.) But before we broke it up, Cathie surprised us all by proposing a final toast: "To Frank Steinitz," she said quietly. "And his crew."

Steinitz: there was a name, as they say, to conjure with. He had led the first deep-space mission, five Athenas to Saturn, fifteen years before. It had been the first attempt to capture the public imagination for a dying program: an investigation of a peculiar object filmed by a Voyager on Iapetus. But nothing much had come of it, and the mission had taken almost seven years. Steinitz and his people had begun as heroes, but in the end they'd become symbols of futility. The press had portrayed them mercilessly as personifications of outworn virtues. Someone had compared them to the Japanese soldiers found as late as the 1970s on Pacific islands, still defending a world long since vanished.

The Steinitz group bore permanent reminders of their folly: prolonged weightlessness had loosened ligaments and tendons, and weakened muscles. Several had developed heart problems, and all suffered from assorted neuroses. As one syndicated columnist had observed, they walked like a bunch of retired big-league catchers.

"That's a good way to end the evening," said Selma, beaming benevolently.

Landolfi looked puzzled. "Cathie," he rumbled, "you've questioned Steinitz's good sense any number of times. And ours, by the way. Isn't it a little hypocritical to drink to him?"

"I'm not impressed by his intelligence," she said, ignoring the obvious parallel. "But he and his people went all the way out to Saturn in those damned things—" she waved in the general direction of the three Athenas orbiting overhead in linkup "—hanging onto baling wire and wing struts. I have to admire that."

"Hell," I said, feeling the effects a little myself, "we've got the same ships he had."

"Yes, you do," said Cathie pointedly.

I had trouble sleeping that night. For a long time, I lay listening to Landolfi's soft snore, and the electronic fidgeting of the operations computer. Cathie was bundled inside a gray blanket, barely visible in her padded chair.

She was right, of course. I knew that rubber boots would never again cross that white landscape, which had waited a billion years for us. The peaks glowed in the reflection of the giant planet: fragile crystalline beauty, on a world of terrifying stillness. Except for an occasional incoming rock, nothing more would ever happen here. Callisto's entire history was encapsuled within twelve days.

Pity there hadn't been something to those early notions about Venusian rain forests and canals on Mars. The Program might have had easier going had Burroughs or Bradbury been right. My God: how many grim surprises had disrupted fictional voyages to Mars? But the truth had been far worse than anything Wells or the others had ever committed to paper: the red planet was so dull that we hadn't even gone there.

Instead, we'd lumbered out to the giants. In ships that drained our lives and our health.

We could have done better; our ships could have *been* better. The computer beside which Landolfi slept contained his design for the fusion engine. And at JPL, an Army team had demonstrated that artificial gravity was possible: a *real* gravity field, not the pathetic fraction created on the Athenas by spinning the inner hull. There were other possibilities as well: infrared ranging could be adapted to replace our elderly scanning system; new alloys were under development. But it would cost billions to build a second-generation vehicle. And unless there were an incentive, unless Cathie Perth carried off a miracle, it would not happen.

Immediately overhead, a bright new star glittered, moving visibly (though slowly) from west to east. That was the linkup, three ships connected nose to nose by umbilicals and a magnetic docking system. Like the Saturn mission, we were a multiple vehicle operation. We were more flexible that way, and we had a safety factor: two ships would be adequate to get the nine-man mission home. Conditions might become a little stuffy, but we'd make it.

I watched it drift through the icy starfield.

Cathie had pulled the plug on the Christmas lights. But it struck me that Callisto would only have one Christmas, so I put them back on.

Victor was on board *Tolstoi* when we lost it. No one ever really knew precisely what happened. We'd begun our long fall toward Jupiter, gaining the acceleration which we'd need on the flight home. Cathie, Herman Selma (the mission commander), and I were riding *Greenswallow*. The ships had separated, and would not rejoin until we'd rounded Jupiter, and settled into our course for home. (The Athenas are really individ-

ually-powered modular units which travel, except when maneuvering, as a single vessel. They're connected bow-to-bow by electromagnets. Coils of segmented tubing, called 'umbilicals' even though the term does not accurately describe their function, provide ready access among the forward areas of the ships. As many as six Athenas can be linked in this fashion, although only five have ever been built. The resulting structure would resemble a wheel.)

Between Callisto and Ganymede, we hit something: a drifting cloud of fine particles, a belt of granular material stretched so thin it never appeared on the LGD, before or after. Cathie later called it a cosmic sandbar; Iseminger thought it an unformed moon. It didn't matter: whatever it was, the mission plowed into it at almost 50,000 kilometers per hour. Alarms clattered, and red lamps blinked on.

In those first moments, I thought the ship was going to come apart. Herman was thrown across a bank of consoles and through an open hatch. I couldn't see Cathie, but a quick burst of profanity came from her direction. Things were being ripped off the hull. Deep within her walls, *Greenswallow* sighed. The lights dipped, came back, and went out. Emergency lamps cut in, and something big glanced off the side of the ship. More alarms howled, and I waited for the clamor of the throaty klaxon which would warn of a holing, and which consequently would be the last sound I could expect to hear in this life.

The sudden deceleration snapped my head back on the pads. (The collision had occurred at the worst possible time: *Greenswallow* was caught in the middle of an attitude alignment. We were flying backwards.)

The exterior monitors were blank: that meant the cameras were gone.

Cathie's voice: "Rob, you okay?"

"Yes."

"Can you see Herman?"

My angle was bad, and I was pinned in my chair. "No. He's back in cargo."

"Is there any way you can close the hatch?"

"Herman's in there," I protested, thinking she'd misunderstood.

"If something tears a hole out back there, we're all going to go. Keeping the door open won't help him."

I hesitated. Sealing up seemed to be the wrong thing to do. (Of course, the fact that the hatch had been open in the first place constituted a safety violation.) "It's on your console," I told her. "Hit the numerics on your upper right."

"Which one?"

"Hit them all." She was seated at the status board, and I could see a row of red lights: several other hatches were open. They should have closed automatically when the first alarms sounded.

We got hit again, this time in front. *Greenswallow* trembled, and loose pieces of metal rattled around inside the walls like broken teeth.

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"Rob," she said. "I don't think it's working."

The baleful lights still glowed across the top of her board.

It lasted about three minutes.

When it was over, we hurried back to look at Herman. We were no longer rotating, and gravity had consequently dropped to zero. Selma, gasping, pale, his skin damp, was floating grotesquely over a pallet of ore-sample cannisters. We got him to a couch and applied compresses. His eyes rolled shut, opened, closed again. "Inside," he said, gently fingering an area just off his sternum. "I think I've been chewed up a little." He raised his head slightly. "What kind of shape are we in?"

I left Cathie with him. Then I restored power, put on a suit and went outside.

The hull was a disaster: antennas were down, housings scored, lenses shattered. The lander was gone, ripped from its web. The port cargo area had buckled, and an auxiliary hatch was sprung. On the bow, the magnetic dock was hammered into slag. Travel between the ships was going to be a little tougher.

Greenswallow looked as if she had been sandblasted. I scraped particles out of her jet nozzles, replaced cable, and bolted down mounts. I caught a glimpse of *Amity's* lights, sliding diagonally across the sky. As were the constellations.

"Cathie," I said. "I see Mac. But I think we're tumbling."

"Okay."

Iseminger was also on board *Amity*. And, fortunately, Marj Aubuchon, our surgeon. Herman's voice broke in, thick with effort. "Rob, we got no radio contact with anyone. Any sign of Victor?"

Ganymede was close enough that its craters lay exposed in harsh solar light. Halfway round the sky, the Pleiades glittered. *Tolstoi's* green and red running lights should have been visible among, or near, the six silver stars. But the sky was empty. I stood a long time and looked, wondering how many other navigators on other oceans had sought lost friends in that constellation. What had they called it in antiquity? The rainy Pleiades. . . . "Only *Amity*," I said.

I tore out some cable and lobbed it in the general direction of Ganymede. Jupiter's enormous arc was pushing above the maintenance pods, spraying October light across the wreckage. I improvised a couple of antennas, replaced some black boxes, and then decided to correct the tumble, if I could.

"Try it now," I said.

Cathie acknowledged.

Two of the jets were useless. I went inside for spares, and replaced the faulty units. While I was finishing up, Cathie came back on. "Rob," she said, "radio's working, more or less. We have no long-range transmit, though."

"Okay. I'm not going to try to do anything about that right now."

"Are you almost finished?"

"Why?"

"Something occurred to me. Maybe the cloud, whatever that damned thing was that we passed through: maybe it's U-shaped."

"Thanks," I said. "I needed something to worry about."

"Maybe you should come back inside."

"Soon as I can. How's the patient doing?"

"Out," she said. "He was a little delirious when he was talking to you. Anyhow, I'm worried: I think something's broken internally. He never got his color back, and he's beginning to bring up blood. Rob, we need Marj."

"You hear anything from *Amity* yet?"

"Just a carrier wave." She did not mention *Tolstoi*. "How bad is it out there?"

From where I was tethered, about halfway back on the buckled beam, I could see a crack in the main plates that appeared to run the length of the port tube. I climbed out onto the exhaust assembly, and pointed my flashlight into the combustion chamber. Something glittered where the reflection should have been subdued. I got in and looked: silicon. Sand, and steel, had fused in the white heat of passage. The exhaust was blocked.

Cathie came back on. "What about it, Rob?" she asked. "Any serious problems?"

"Cathie," I said, "*Greenswallow's* going to Pluto."

Herman thought I was Landolfi: he kept assuring me that everything was going to be okay. His pulse was weak and rapid, and he alternated between sweating and shivering. Cathie had got a blanket under him and buckled him down so he wouldn't hurt himself. She bunched some pillows under his feet, and held a damp compress to his head.

"That's not going to help much. Raising his legs, I mean."

She looked at me, momentarily puzzled. "Oh," she said. "Not enough gravity."

I nodded.

"Oh, Rob." Her eyes swept the cases and cannisters, all neatly tagged, silicates from Pasiphae, sulfur from Himalia, assorted carbon compounds from Callisto. We had evidence now that Io had formed elsewhere in the solar system, and been well along in middle age when it was captured. We'd all but eliminated the possibility that life existed in Jupiter's atmosphere. We understood why rings formed around gas giants, and we had a new clue to the cause of terrestrial ice ages. And I could see that Cathie was thinking about trading lives to satisfy the curiosity of a few academics. "We don't belong out here," she said, softly. "Not in these primitive shells."

I said nothing.

"I got a question for you," she continued. "We're not going to find *Tolstoi*, right?"

"Is that your question?"

"No. I wish it were. But the LGD can't see them. That means they're just not there." Her eyes filled with tears, but she shook her head impatiently. "And we can't steer this thing. Can *Amity* carry six people?"

"It might have to."

"That wasn't what I asked."

"Food and water would be tight. Especially since we're running out of time, and wouldn't be able to transfer much over. If any. So we'd all be a little thinner when we got back. But yes, I think we could survive."

We stared at one another, and then she turned away. I became conscious of the ship: the throb of power deep in her bulkheads (power now permanently bridled by conditions in the combustion chambers), the soft amber glow of the navigation lamps in the cockpit.

McGuire's nasal voice, from *Amity*, broke the uneasy silence. "Herman, you okay?"

Cathie looked at me, and I nodded. "Mac," she said, "this is Perth. Herman's hurt. We need Marj."

"Okay," he said. "How bad?"

"We don't know. Internal injuries, looks like. He appears to be in shock."

We heard him talking to someone else. Then he came back. "We're on our way. I'll put Marj on in a minute; maybe she can help from here. How's the ship?"

"Not good: the dock's gone, and the engine might as well be."

He asked me to be specific. "If we try a burn, the rear end'll fall off."

McGuire delivered a soft, venomous epithet. And then: "Do what you can for Herman. Marj'll be right here."

Cathie was looking at me strangely. "He's worried," she said.

"Yes. He's in charge now. . . . "

"Rob, you say you *think* we'll be okay. What's the problem?"

"We might," I said, "run a little short of air."

Greenswallow continued her plunge toward Jupiter at a steadily increasing rate and a sharp angle of approach: we would pass within about 60,000 kilometers, and then drop completely out of the plane of the solar system. We appeared to be heading in the general direction of the Southern Cross.

Cathie worked on Herman. His breathing steadied, and he slipped in and out of his delirium. We sat beside him, not talking much. After awhile, Cathie asked, "What happens now?"

"In a few hours," I said, "we'll reach our insertion point. By then, we have to be ready to change course." She frowned, and I shrugged. "That's it," I said. "It's all the time we have to get over to *Amity*. If we don't make the insertion on time, *Amity* won't have the fuel to throw a U-turn later."

"Rob, how are we going to get Herman over there?"

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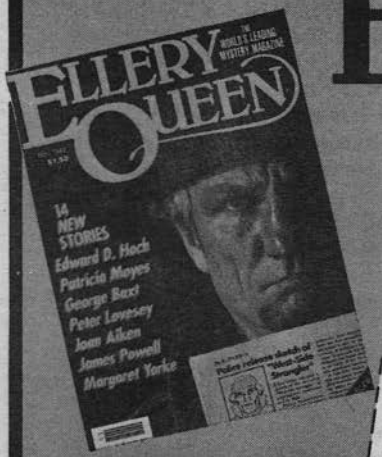

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That was an uncomfortable question. The prospect of jamming him down into a suit was less than appealing, but there was no other way. "We'll just have to float him over," I said. "Marj won't like it much."

"Neither will Herman."

"You wanted a little high drama," I said, unnecessarily. "The next show should be a barnburner."

Her mouth tightened, and she turned away from me.

One of the TV cameras had picked up the approach of *Amity*. Some of her lights were out, and she too looked a bit bent. The Athena is a homely vessel in the best of times, whale-shaped and snub-nosed, with a midship flare that suggests middle-age spread. But I was glad to see her.

Cathie snuffled at the monitor, and blew her nose. "Your Program's dead, Rob." Her eyes blazed momentarily, like a dying fire into which one has flung a few drops of water. "We're leaving three of our people out here; and if you're right about the air, we'll get home with a shipload of defectives, or worse. Won't that look good on the six o'clock news?" She gazed vacantly at *Amity's* image. "I'd hoped," she said, "that if things went well, Victor would have lived to see a ship carry his fusion engine. And maybe his name, as well. Ain't gonna happen, though. Not ever."

I had not allowed myself to think about the oxygen problem we were going to face. The Athenas recycle their air supply: the converters in a single ship can maintain a crew of three, or even four, indefinitely. But six?

I was not looking forward to the ride home.

A few minutes later, a tiny figure detached itself from the shadow of the Athena and started across: Marj Aubuchon on a maintenance sled. McGuire's voice erupted from the ship's speakers. "Rob, we've taken a long look at your engines, and we agree with your assessment. The damage complicates things." Mac had a talent for understatement. It derived, not from a sophisticated sense of humor, but from a genuine conviction of his own inferiority. He preferred to solve problems by denying their existence. He was the only one of the original nine who could have been accurately described as passive: other people's opinions carried great weight with him. His prime value to the mission was his grasp of Athena systems. But he'd been a reluctant crewman, a man who periodically reminded us that he wanted only to retire to his farm in Indiana. He wouldn't have been along at all except that one guy died and somebody else came down with an unexpected (but thoroughly earned) disease. Now, with Selma incapacitated and Landolfi gone, McGuire was in command. It must have been disconcerting for him. "We've got about five hours," he continued. "Don't let Marj get involved in major surgery. She's already been complaining to me that it doesn't sound as if it'll be possible to move him. *We have no alternative.* She knows that, but you know how she is. Okay?"

One of the monitors had picked him up. He looked rumpled, and nervous. Not an attitude to elicit confidence. "Mac," said Cathie, "we may kill him trying to get him over there."

"You'll kill him if you don't," he snapped. "Get your personal stuff together, and bring it with you. You won't be going back."

"What about trying to transfer some food?" I asked.

"We can't dock," he said. "And there isn't time to float it across."

"Mac," said Cathie, "is *Amity* going to be able to support six people?"

I listened to McGuire breathing. He turned away to issue some trivial instructions to Iseminger. When he came back he said, simply and tonelessly, "Probably not." And then, coldbloodedly (I thought), "How's Herman doing?"

Maybe it was my imagination. Certainly there was nothing malicious in his tone, but Cathie caught it too, and turned sharply round. "McGuire is a son-of-a-bitch," she hissed. I don't know whether Mac heard it.

Marjorie Aubuchon was short, blond, and irritable. When I relayed McGuire's concerns about time, she said, "God knows, that's all I've heard for the last half-hour." She observed that McGuire was a jerk, and bent over Herman. The blood was pink and frothy on his lips. After a few minutes she said, to no one in particular, "Probably a punctured lung." She waved Cathie over, and began filling a hypo; I went for a walk.

At sea, there's a long tradition of sentiment between mariners and their ships. Enlisted men identify with them, engineers baby them, and captains go down with them. No similar attitude has developed in space flight. We've never had an *Endeavour*, or a *Golden Hind*. Always, off Earth, it has been the mission, rather than the ship. *Friendship VII* and *Apollo XI* were far more than vehicles. I'm not sure why that is; maybe it reflects Cathie's view that travel between the worlds is still in its *Kon-Tiki* phase: the voyage itself is of such epic proportions that everything else is overwhelmed.

But I'd lived almost three years on *Greenswallow*. It was a long time to be confined to her narrow spaces. Nevertheless, she was shield and provider against that enormous abyss, and I discovered (while standing in the doorway of my cabin) a previously unfelt affection for her.

A few clothes were scattered round the room, a shirt was hung over my terminal, and two pictures were mounted on the plastic wall. One was a Casnavan print of a covered bridge in New Hampshire; the other was a telecopy of an editorial cartoon that had appeared in the *Washington Post*. The biggest human problem we had, of course, was sheer boredom. And Cathie had tried to capture the dimensions of the difficulty by showing crewmembers filling the long days on the outbound journey with bridge. ("It would be nice," Cathie's narrator had said at one point, "if we could take everybody out to an Italian restaurant now and then.") The *Post* cartoon had appeared several days later: it depicted four astronauts holding cards. (We could recognize Selma, Landolfi, and Marj. The fourth, whose back was turned, was exceedingly feminine, and appeared to be Esther Crowley.) An enormous bloodshot eye is looking in through one window; a tentacle and a UFO are visible through another.

The "Selma" character, his glasses characteristically down on his nose, is examining his hand, and delivering the caption: *Dummy looks out the window and checks the alien.*

I packed the New Hampshire bridge, and left the cartoon. If someone comes by, in 20 million years or so, he might need a laugh. I went up to the cockpit with my bag.

McGuire checked with me to see how we were progressing. "Fine," I told him. I was still sitting there four hours later when Cathie appeared behind me.

"Rob," she said, "we're ready to move him." She smiled wearily. "Marj says he should be okay if we can get him over there without breaking anything else."

We cut the spin on the inner module to about point-oh-five. Then we lifted Herman onto a stretcher, and carried him carefully down to the airlock.

Cathie stared straight ahead, saying nothing. Her fine-boned cheeks were pale, and her eyes seemed focused far away. These, I thought, were her first moments to herself, unhampered by other duties. The impact of events was taking hold.

Marj called McGuire and told him we were starting over, and that she would need a sizable pair of shears when we got there to cut Herman's suit open. "Please have them ready," she said. "We may be in a hurry."

I had laid out his suit earlier: we pulled it up over his legs. That was easy, but the rest of it was slow, frustrating work. "We need a special kind of unit for this," Marj said. "Probably a large bag, without arms or legs. If we're ever dumb enough to do anything like this again, I'll recommend it."

McGuire urged us to hurry.

Once or twice, Cathie's eyes met mine. Something passed between us, but I was too distracted to define it. Then we were securing his helmet, and adjusting the oxygen mixture.

"I think we're okay," Marj observed, her hand pressed against Selma's chest. "Let's get him over there. . . . "

I opened the inner airlock, and pulled my own helmet into place. Then we guided Herman in, and secured him to *Greenswallow's* maintenance sled. (The sled was little more than a toolshed with jet nozzles.) I recovered my bag and stowed it on board.

"I'd better get my stuff," Cathie said. "You can get Herman over all right?"

"Of course," said Marj. "*Amity's* sled is secured outside the lock. Use that."

She hesitated in the open hatchway, raised her left hand, and spread the fingers wide. Her eyes grew very round, and she formed two syllables that I was desperately slow to understand: in fact, I don't think I translated the gesture, the word, until we were halfway across to *Amity*, and the lock was irrevocably closed behind us.

"Good-bye."

Cathie's green eyes sparkled with barely controlled emotion across a dozen or so monitors. Her black hair, which had been tied back earlier, now framed her angular features and fell to her shoulders. It was precisely in that partial state of disarray that tends to be most appealing. She looked as if she'd been crying, but her jaw was set, and she stood erect. Beneath the gray tunic, her breast rose and fell.

"What the hell are you doing, Perth?" demanded McGuire. He looked tired, almost ill. He'd gained weight since we'd left the Cape, his hair had whitened and retreated, his flesh had grown blotchy, and he'd developed jowls. The contrast with his dapper image in the mission photo was sobering. "Get moving!" he said, striving to keep his voice from rising. "We're not going to make our burn!"

"I'm staying where I am," she said. "I couldn't make it over there now anyway. I wouldn't even have time to put on the suit."

McGuire's puffy eyelids slid slowly closed. "Why?" he asked.

She looked out of the cluster of screens, a segmented Cathie, a group-Cathie. "Your ship won't support six people, Mac."

"Dammit!" His voice was a harsh rasp. "It would have just meant we'd cut down activity. Sleep a lot." He waved a hand in front of his eyes, as though his vision were blurred. "Cathie, we've lost you. There's no way we can get you back!"

"I know."

No one said anything. Iseminger stared at her.

"Is Herman okay?" she asked.

"Marj is still working on him," I said. "She thinks we got him across okay."

"Good."

A series of yellow lamps blinked on across the pilot's console. We had two minutes. "Damn," I said, suddenly aware of another danger: *Amity* was rotating, turning toward its new course. Would *Greenswallow* even survive the ignition? I looked at McGuire, who understood. His fingers flicked over press pads, and rows of numbers flashed across the navigation monitor. I could see muscles working in Cathie's jaws; she looked down at Mac's station as though she could read the result.

"It's all right," he said. "She'll be clear."

"Cathie . . . " Iseminger's voice was almost strangled. "If I'd known you intended anything like this . . . "

"I know, Ed." Her tone was gentle, a lover's voice, perhaps. Her eyes were wet: she smiled anyway, full face, up close.

Deep in the systems, pumps began to whine. "I wish," said Iseminger, absolutely without expression, "that we could do something."

She turned her back, strode with unbearable grace across the command center, away from us, and passed into the shadowy interior of the cockpit. Another camera picked her up there, and we got a profile: she was achingly lovely in the soft glow of the navigation lamps.

"There is something . . . you can do," she said. "Build Landolfi's engine. And come back for me."

For a brief moment, I thought Mac was going to abort the burn. But he sat frozen, fists clenched, and did the right thing, which is to say, nothing. It struck me that McGuire was incapable of intervening.

And I knew also that the woman in the cockpit was terrified of what she had done. It had been a good performance, but she'd utterly failed to conceal the fear that looked out of her eyes. And I realized with shock that she'd acted, not to prolong her life, but to save the Program. I watched her face as *Amity's* engines ignited, and we began to draw away. Like McGuire, she seemed paralyzed, as though the nature of the calamity which she'd embraced was just becoming clear to her. Then it—she—was gone.

"What happened to the picture?" snapped Iseminger.

"She turned it off," I said. "I don't think she wants us to see her just now."

He glared at me, and spoke to Mac. "Why the hell," he demanded, "couldn't he have brought her back with him?" His fists were knotted.

"I didn't know," I said. "How could I know?" And I wondered, how could I not?

When the burn ended, the distance between the two ships had opened to only a few kilometers. But it was a gulf, I thought, wider than any across which men had before looked at each other.

Iseminger called her name relentlessly. (We knew she could hear us.) But we got only the carrier wave.

Then her voice crackled across the command center. "Good," she said. "Excellent. Check the recorders: make sure you got everything on tape." Her image was back. She was in full light again, tying up her hair. Her eyes were hooded, and her lips pursed thoughtfully. "Rob," she continued, "fade it out during Ed's response, when he's calling my name. Probably, you'll want to reduce the background noise at that point. Cut all the business about who's responsible. We want a sacrifice, not an oversight."

"My God, Cathie," I said. I stared at her, trying to understand. "What have you done?"

She took a deep breath. "I meant what I said. I have enough food to get by here for eight years or so. More if I stretch it. *And plenty of fresh air.* Well, relatively fresh. I'm better off than any of us would be if six people were trying to survive on *Amity*."

"Cathie!" howled McGuire. He sounded in physical agony. "Cathie, we didn't know for sure about life support. The converters might have kept up. There might have been enough air! It was just an estimate!"

"This is a hell of a time to tell me," she said. "Well, it doesn't matter now. Listen, I'll be fine. I've got books to read, and maybe one to write. My long-range communications are *kaput*, Rob knows that, so you'll have to come back for the book, too." She smiled. "You'll like it, Mac." The

command center got very still. "And on nights when things really get boring, I can play bridge with the computer."

McGuire shook his head. "You're sure you'll be all right? You seemed pretty upset a few minutes ago."

She looked at me and winked.

"The first Cathie was staged, Mac," I said.

"I give up," McGuire sighed. "Why?" He swiveled round to face the image on his screen. "Why would you do that?"

"That young woman," she replied, "was committing an act of uncommon valor, as they say in the Marines. And she had to be vulnerable." And compellingly lovely, I thought. In those last moments, I was realizing what it might mean to love Cathie Perth. "This Cathie," she grinned, "is doing the only sensible thing. And taking a sabbatical as well. Do what you can to get the ship built. I'll be waiting. Come if you can." She paused. "Somebody should suggest they name it after Victor."

This is the fifth Christmas since that one on Callisto. It's a long time by any human measure. We drifted out of radio contact during the first week. There was some talk of broadcasting instructions to her for repairing her long-range transmission equipment. But she'd have to go outside to do it, so the idea was prudently tabled.

She was right about that tape. In my lifetime, I've never seen people so singlemindedly aroused. It created a global surge of sympathy and demands for action that seem to grow in intensity with each passing year. Funded partially by contributions and technical assistance from abroad, NASA has been pushing the construction of the fusion vessel that Victor Landolfi dreamed of.

Iseminger was assigned to help with the computer systems, and he's kept me informed of progress. The most recent public estimates had anticipated a spring launch. But that single word *September* in Iseminger's card suggests that one more obstacle has been encountered; and it means still another year before we can hope to reach her.

We broadcast to her on a regular basis. I volunteered to help, and I sit sometimes and talk to her for hours. She gets a regular schedule of news, entertainment, sports, whatever. And, if she's listening, she knows that we're coming.

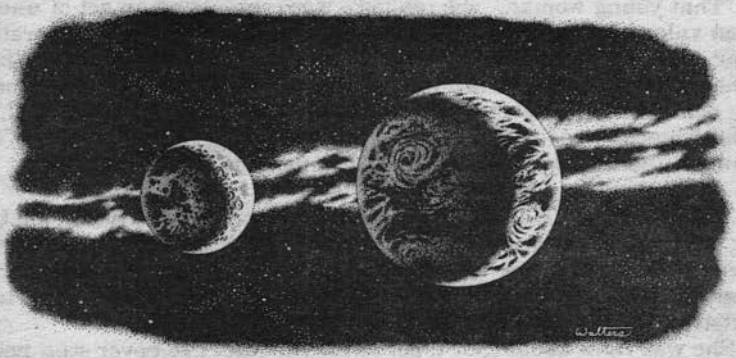
And she also knows that her wish that the fusion ship be named for Victor Landolfi has been disregarded. The rescue vehicle will be the *Catherine Perth.*

If she's listening: we have no way of knowing. And I worry a lot. Can a human being survive six years of absolute solitude? Iseminger was here for a few days last summer, and he tells me he is confident. "She's a tough lady," he said, any number of times. "Nothing bothers her. She even gave us a little theater at the end."

And that's what scares me: Cathie's theatrical technique. I've thought about it, on the long ride home, and here. I kept a copy of the complete

tape of that final conversation, despite McGuire's instructions to the contrary, and I've watched it a few times. It's locked downstairs in a file cabinet now, and I don't look at it anymore. I'm afraid to. There are two Cathie Perths on the recording: the frightened, courageous one who galvanized a global public; and our Cathie, preoccupied with her job, flexible, almost indifferent to her situation. A survivor.

And, God help me, I can't tell which one was staged. ●



MARTIN GARDNER (from page 30)

SOLUTION TO THE BARBERS OF BARBERPOLIA

The two barbers can complete the job in 22.5 minutes. Here's one way:

For the first 10 minutes the first barber cuts *A*'s hair, while the second barber shampoos *B* and *C*.

For the next 2.5 minutes the first barber cuts one-fourth of *B*'s hair, while the second barber completes the first half of shampooing *A*.

For the next 10 minutes the first barber cuts *C*'s hair, while the second barber finishes *A*'s shampoo, then during the remaining 7.5 minutes she completes *B*'s haircut.

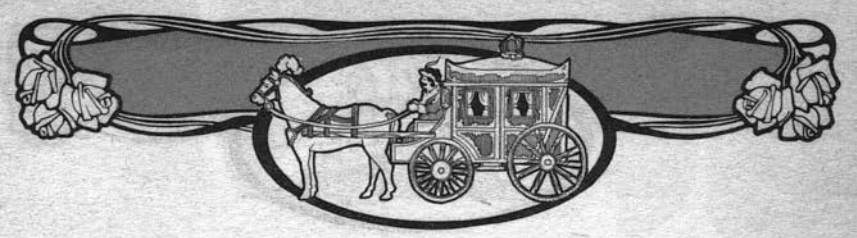
Now for a slightly harder problem. It will introduce you to one of the most useful of all formulas in elementary algebra. As before, one barber completes a haircut in ten minutes. However, another barber, just learning the trade, takes twenty minutes. If the two barbers were allowed to work together on the same customer, how long would they take to cut his or her hair?

See page 176 for the answer.

NATURE EMPTY OF MAN

Confined, tormented,
Overrun by our own kind
We crave for nature's emptiness
Bringing us through contrast
Heaven.
So Saturn's emptiness
Relieved only by the human joy
Of discovery
Reached after a three year journey
Revives us now
As yesterday on earth—
Through a film—
We feasted on
The empty Australian landscape
So strange,
So majestical,
Relieved only by
Our human beauty-finding
Of animal and plant:
Empty of man
There for a moment
For our parched longing
Like a sniff of oxygen
Or the caught breath of a rose.

—C. Denis Pegge



EVER AFTER

by Lisa Goldstein

art: George Thompson

The author's first book,
The Red Magician (Timescape)
won the 1983 American Book Award for best paperback.
She recently sold
her second book to Bantam,
and has started writing almost full-time.

The wedding ceremony had been very tiring. Of course they'd rehearsed it—rehearsed it over and over until she thought she'd fall asleep during the actual ceremony—but they had never gone through it while she was wearing the wedding gown. The gown had been made in a hurry, and made wrong: the bodice pinched so tightly she thought she wouldn't be able to breathe.

The gown. The princess felt a wave of embarrassment thinking about it, glad that the inside of the coach was so dark that he couldn't see her blush. Of course she couldn't afford a wedding gown, she had known that, and she had expected that something had been arranged. But when she'd found out that it hadn't been, she'd had to go to the prince and haltingly, stuttering on almost every word, explain her problem. And the prince had had to go to his father, the king, and the king (who was very kind, everyone had said so) had laughed and said, Well of course, buy her a gown. Only make it green, to match her eyes.

It had been a joke, she knew that. Only when the king made a joke everybody took it as an order, because they were never sure when it wasn't going to be a joke. And her eyes were blue, not green, but the

king, being very near-sighted, hadn't known that. So she had to stand through the ceremony horribly self-conscious, knowing that all around her people must be whispering, "The fairest in the land? She certainly doesn't look it."

And the reception afterwards had been, if anything, even worse. "You're very fortunate," people told her, over and over again. "Very fortunate." The princess had smiled and nodded, thinking, But what about him? Don't they know how fortunate he is to have me? Because I do love him, more than any of these people ever would. And once she had said, "Yes, very fortunate," and the woman she had been talking to laughed, and she had blushed a deep red, wondering if she had said the wrong thing.

"It's your accent, dear," the woman said. "We can barely understand you."

I can understand you just fine, the princess had wanted to say, but of course she had been hearing aristocratic speech, and following aristocratic orders, ever since she was a small child. "It's very quaint," another woman had said, clearly anxious to make her feel better, and then had said, "Oh, look, she's blushing."

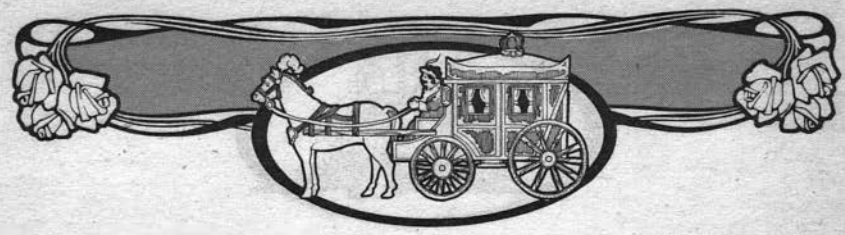
In the darkness of the coach she tugged at the bodice, trying to straighten it. She had only worn one other fancy gown in her life, and that one had fit so perfectly she had thought they all would be like that. "Is something wrong, dear?" the prince said, reaching over to squeeze her hand. "We'll be there soon."

"Oh no, nothing," she said. How could she act this way, so ungrateful? As if she hadn't just been given the most exciting day of her life? She smiled at him. "I'm just tired, that's all."

An hour later the coach stopped. She had thought, when the prince had told her they were going to his country estate, that it would be a small house hidden among trees. Through the windows of the coach she could see an enormous building, to her eyes almost the size of the castle in the city. All the lights were blazing.

The servants were ready to take the coach, to feed them if they wanted food, to undress them and take them up to bed. She lay in the large canopied bed, waiting for him, feeling bereft. When he finally came to her she recognized the sensation: she wanted to cry.

The prince took her very gently, stopping often to whisper reassurances. At times she almost wanted to laugh. Did he really think she knew nothing about what went on between a man and a woman? There



had been nights, at home, when her step-sisters would talk of nothing else. Still, she couldn't help feeling a tenderness towards him. He did love her, after all.

He was gone when she woke the next morning. She sat up, wondering what happened next. After a while she stood up, padding about the stone floor in her bare feet. One door she opened led to a closet filled with men's clothing. The next door should be—Yes, it was. She took out a simple white dress, very much like the one she had worn to the ball, and put it on.

One of the servants, a woman, looked in the door for a minute. The servant began to laugh. The princess could hear her running down the hall, laughing. After a few minutes another servant—much younger, about her age—came in the room.

"Good morning, my lady," the servant said.

"Hello," the princess said nervously.

"Please come with me, my lady," the servant said. She led her to an adjoining room. "Here. I'll help you undress."

What's that? the princess wanted to say, but she recognized a bath just in time. She had never seen one so large and so white. Did these people bathe every day then? She stepped out of the dress and the servant hung it up for her.

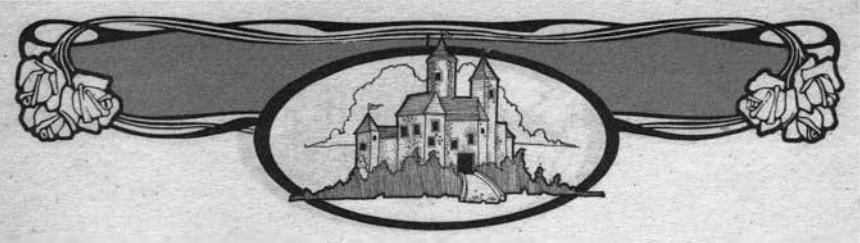
When she got out of the bath the servant had another dress ready. Was the other one dirty? Or wasn't it appropriate for today, for whatever she was going to do today? Without questioning, she put the dress on.

The prince was already at the table when she came down for breakfast. "Lessons," he said, popping a muffin into his mouth. "You're going to have lessons today. You can't do everything the way you've always done it." He looked at her fondly.

"Yes, my lord," she said, bowing her head to cover her blushes. He had heard, then. Someone had told him about what had happened this morning. Still, he thought she was capable of learning. And if he thought so then she was capable. She would live up to his trust in her. She was eager to learn. "What sort of lessons?"

"Mmm," the prince said. "Etiquette. Manners. What else? What do ladies have to know? Embroidery. Oh, and we'll have to correct your pretty little accent. We'll start here, on our honeymoon. That way when we get back to the palace you won't feel so out of place."

She looked at him, puzzled. He did love her, didn't he? Then why was



he so anxious to keep her out of his way during the day? "And you, my lord?" she said. "What will you be doing?"

"Oh, the usual thing," he said. "Fox-hunting, falconry. I have my lessons too. I'll have to learn to be a king someday. But you don't have to worry about that."

She smiled at him. Of course not. Of course he would have more important things to do.

And so it started. Monday, Wednesday, and Friday in the morning was etiquette. She learned how to address people and she learned how they should address her. She learned where to seat them at dinner. She learned what to wear to which occasions and what the latest fashions were. In the afternoons she learned how to speak like an aristocrat. Her Tuesdays and Thursdays were free, which meant that in the morning she had to embroider with the ladies-in-waiting and in the afternoon she had to deal with the day-to-day problems of running an estate. Your neighbor Lord So-and-so has just had a son, what should we get the baby? The coachman wants the day off to see his mother. The downstairs maid is sick. On weekends she got to see the prince, but on Saturdays there was usually a dinner or a dance to go to, and on Sundays there was church.

And she had insomnia. Of course that was to be expected after nearly a lifetime of sleeping on hard stones, but she hadn't hought that it would happen and it worried her. She tossed and turned in the large bed, trying to get comfortable, trying not to wake the prince. The prince must never know, never suspect that she was ungrateful. The prince would rise early to go hunting and she would fall asleep at dawn and be awakened, hours later, by the young servant, her personal maid. "Come, my lady, it's time to go to breakfast."

She never got enough sleep. She was tired doing her lessons, tired doing her embroidery, tired talking to the cooks and cleaning women. "You look very pale," they would tell her, and shake their heads. She once overheard two of the kitchen maids wonder if she was pregnant.

Of all her lessons she liked embroidery the best. She was good at it, having had to sew and mend for her step-mother and step-sisters all her life. She liked working with the silk threads and good linen and bright sharp needles. But the conversation of the ladies-in-waiting, even of the ones who made an effort to be kind to her, flowed over her. She didn't know the people they talked about, didn't know why it was important that Lord So-and-so's cousin had married Lady Such-and-such or that

Lord So-and-so's son had come down with a mysterious disease. She had asked the woman who taught her court etiquette, but the woman, an old distant relative of the king's, hadn't been to the palace for years and all her gossip was thirty years out of date. And once or twice it seemed that the ladies-in-waiting laughed and talked about her. But there was nothing she could do about that.

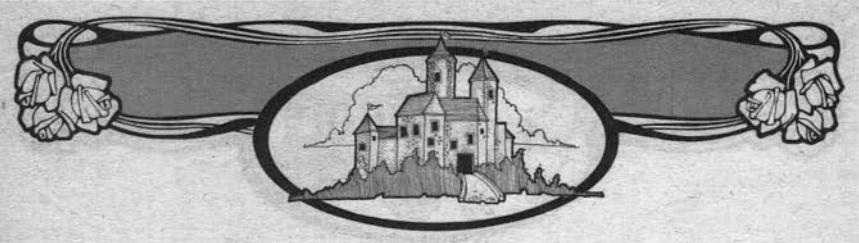
Every day the princess improved, everyone told her so. She made fewer and fewer mistakes. The servants hadn't laughed at her since that first day. Her accent still wasn't perfect, but she never said anything at the major functions and nobody seemed to notice. (She noticed that the women hardly talked until after dinner anyway, and then only among themselves.) Still, when the prince told her that they had to be back at the palace in a few days she felt apprehensive.

The palace was far more confusing that the country house. There were hundreds of people, each one with a different name and a different function, and she was supposed to remember them all. Some of the more important servants looked like nobility and some of the least important of the nobility looked like servants, so that she could barely keep them straight. And the king was here, the king who seemed jolly enough but who always made her nervous. How did he really feel about his son marrying a commoner?

Here people were always whispering to her, warning her about other people. "Do you see that woman there, leaning against the pillar?" a minor prince said to her one night at a dance. She nodded. "That's the Lady Flora. She was the prince's sweetheart, before he met you. You'd better watch out for her." She nodded again, puzzled. What could either one of them do? The princess was married, the Lady Flora was not: what did the man mean by "watch out for her?"

One night after a concert in the small dining room (the one that sat twenty-four people) the young woman who played the harp came up to her and slipped a note into her hand when no one was looking. The princess looked up, startled, but the harpist had already crossed the room. She took the note to bed with her and got up to read it after the prince was asleep. She had had some schooling before her father died so she knew how to read; she laughed to think that she might have had to ask someone to help her read a note that was so obviously intended to be private.

"We are in desperate need of your help," the note said. "If you love



liberty and justice—and we know that you do, being of the people yourself—please respond to us through the harpist. Your friends."

She crumpled the note and burned it with the candle she had used to read by. What did it mean? Who were these people who called themselves her friends? They were working against the king, that much was clear. Did they expect her to betray her king, her husband the prince?

She could not sleep at all that night. In the morning, instead of going to her lessons, she sent for the young harpist.

"Yes, my lady?" the harpist said, coming into her room.

"I want to talk to you," the princess said. She stopped, immediately at a loss. What did she want to talk about? "About your note."

"Yes, my lady?" The harpist was clearly nervous.

"You can't—surely you can't expect me—" The princess stopped for a moment, silent.

"I had nothing to do with it, my lady!" the harpist said, alarmed. "They just asked me to deliver the note, because they knew I'd be safe. I'm not a revolutionary—I just play the harp. Truly, my lady."

"I believe you," the princess said. "I—What's your name?"

"Alison, my lady."

"Well, Alison," the princess said. "I—I just wanted to know who it was who gave you the note. No, no, I don't ask you to betray anyone!" she said hastily, seeing the girl become alarmed again. "I'm curious, that's all. Who are they?"

"They?" Alison said. For a moment the princess thought the girl might be half-witted. "I know—I only know one of them, the—the leader, I guess. He asked me to deliver the note."

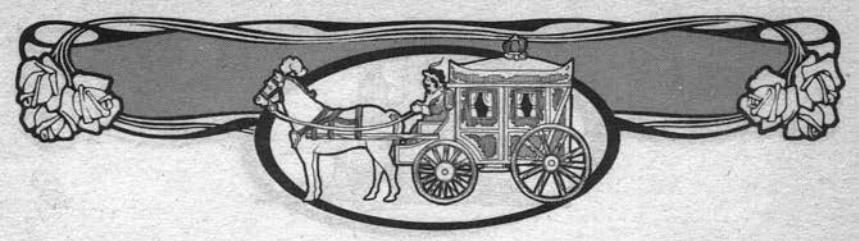
"And what's he like?"

"Oh, he's very handsome, my lady," Alison said. "He's—I don't know—very persuasive. A personality like sparks flying. You should meet him, my lady."

The princess sat back, satisfied. It was clear now. A young woman in love with a handsome young man who persuades her to deliver a note. Perhaps there was no revolution at all, perhaps there was just this young man. There was no threat to the palace, she could be sure of that. She had done her duty. She could let the harpist go.

And yet—and yet there was something else, something that intrigued her. "How old are you, Alison?"

"Nineteen, my lady."



"Nineteen," the princess said. "How long have you been playing the harp?"

"Oh, all my life, lady," Alison said, laughing. "I got my first harp as a child, for my sixth birthday."

"But to play for the king—young women generally don't—"

"I've been playing for my supper since I was ten, my lady," Alison said.

"Yes?" the princess said, hoping the girl would go on, unable to ask more questions.

"I'm from the north, my lady," Alison said. She spoke flatly now, without emotion. "My house was burned by the king's armies when I was ten years old. I'm an orphan, my lady."

"So—so am I!" the princess said, delighted to have something in common with her.

"I know, my lady," Alison said.

The princess stopped. Of course Alison knew. No doubt the whole country knew. No doubt Alison had even sung songs about the orphan who had married a prince. When would she stop being so stupid?"

And Alison—things had not gone as well for her. She was very plain, flat face, flat nose, her green northern eyes too wide and too far apart. Not even the revolutionary would be interested in her. "And then?" the princess said. "What happened then?"

"I dressed as a boy and made my way here," Alison said. "To the capital."

"A boy?" the princess said.

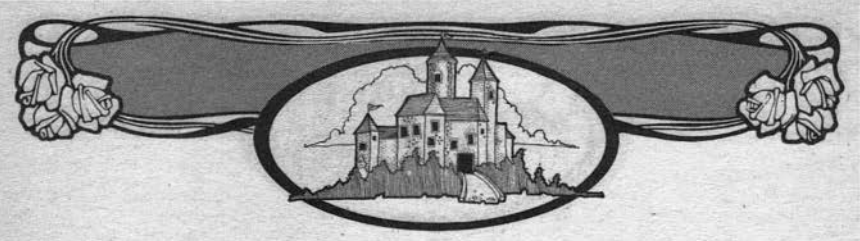
"Oh, yes," Alison said. "I've done it—I've had to do it—many times since then, to travel. A boy or a man. It's not very difficult."

"Listen," the princess said suddenly, impulsively. "Could you—I mean, would you like to give me harp lessons? That's something a lady should know, isn't it? How to play the harp?"

Alison smiled for the first time. "Yes, my lady," she said. "I would love to."

Somehow the harp lessons were fit into the princess's schedule. The prince made no objection. Alison told her about her life, about the time she had sailed on a merchant ship because she had no money, the time she had played in an alehouse and spotted in the audience the man who had burned her house, the time she had lived in the woods and hunted to stay alive. Gradually the lessons on the harp stopped and the two women would talk instead. Alison learned to stop calling her "my lady."

And gradually the princess began to tell Alison about herself. The



prince's eyesight was failing, like the king's, and he was coming back from the hunt in worse and worse temper. She felt, she told Alison, as if she should know what to do, as if there were some court pleasure that would keep him occupied but she had never learned what it was. She could not confide in any of the ladies-in-waiting. When the prince was away she would remember how he had loved her, remember the look in his eyes when he had found her after all his searching, and she would try not to cry.

Alison continued to see the revolutionary and to tell the princess about his plans. The princess felt as if she should be telling the prince what she was learning, but somehow the bond between Alison and her had grown too strong. And she never really believed the revolutionary could be a threat. He had raised followers, he was living in the forest beyond the city, he still wanted her to join him and "the people." She still would not go to him.

One evening the princess dressed and went down to dinner. The prince was already there, along with the king and the court. "Good evening, my lord," she said. "How are you?"

"As if you care," the prince said. He lifted his goblet and drank. "As if you care about anything but that damned harpist friend of yours."

She sat, stunned. Around the table people were averting their eyes, pretending not to listen. She knew this would be the major piece of gossip among the ladies-in-waiting the next day. "How—how was the hunt, my lord?" she asked softly.

"You know damn well how the hunt was!" he said. "I can't see a damn thing. Never could. Never could even back when I thought you were the fairest in the land. The fairest. Hah!"

"My lord?" she said.

"You know what they say about you?" the prince said. "They laugh at you! They laugh at you and they make fun of your accent and they think I'm just about the funniest fellow since my great-great-great-grandfather, the one they had to lock away, for bringing you here. If only I had known! If only I had thought before bringing you here, instead of being seduced by a pretty face. My life is ruined. Ruined!"

"I'll leave, my lord," she said with great dignity. "I wouldn't want to be the cause of your unhappiness."

"No, no, that's all right," he said. He took another sip of wine and patted her hand. "You stay. You stay and tell me all about what you did

today. What did you and that harpist talk about, hm? Did you talk about me?"

"You? No, my lord."

"No," he said. "Well, what then? Plots, conspiracies? What do you talk about behind my back?"

For a moment she thought he had heard about the revolution and that they were lost. Her fingers twisted under the table. "I don't feel well," the prince said suddenly. "I don't feel well at all."

"Quick!" the princess said, motioning to one of the soldiers standing at the door. "The prince is unwell. Take him to his room."

The prince lay back in his chair, gone very pale. Two soldiers came and escorted him out of the room. "Very good, my dear," the king whispered to her. "Very good indeed. You handled that very well."

And the princess thought that she had handled it well too. She went to bed that night and slept till dawn, woke and bathed and dressed. It was only when one of the clerks came to see her about a minor problem, a dedication ceremony at one of the churches, that she began to cry.

"My lady?" the clerk said.

"Go away," she said. "Oh, please, go away."

She went to bed. She cancelled all her lessons and engagements and she stayed in bed, crying. The prince came in to see her and said that he was very sorry, that he had been drinking and that he would never go hunting again but would stay and take care of her, but she told him to go away, and he moved into another room. She cried for her dead parents, for all the years she had spent sleeping on the hard floor and being taunted by her step-mother and step-sisters, for all the months locked away in a stone castle, her happy ending. And, after a while, after a month or so, she stopped.

She sat up in bed. Her first feeling was surprise, surprise that there were no more tears. Sun came in through the high windows. She stood up, pleased to feel the hard stone floor under her feet, and went to her closet. None of the maids was around and she dressed herself carefully, feeling pleasure in the act of doing something for herself. Things weren't so bad, after all. There was nothing that she couldn't live with. She sat on the edge of the bed, looking at the room.

There was a broom in one of the corners that a careless maid had left. Without even thinking about what she was doing she took the broom and began to sweep, a slow, pleasant motion that drove all thoughts from

her mind. It was good to be up again, good to be doing something besides lying in bed. . . .

A sudden movement at the door made her look up. One of the maids stood at the doorway, looking in. The maid turned and ran down the hallway. The princess wasn't sure, but the woman at the door had looked like the maid who had laughed at her on the first day of her honeymoon, that day long ago when she hadn't known what to expect.

Dinner that night was a disaster. Somehow everyone in the court had heard that she had swept her room like a common kitchen girl that morning. The gossips stood in the corner and laughed, glancing at her often from behind their fans. Once she had heard her old nickname, the one she had hated, spoken in whispers—Cinder Girl. She looked up sharply and saw Flora watching her coolly. She looked away quickly and tried not to cry.

After dinner she went straight to her room, speaking to no one. As she left the dining-room she saw the prince and Flora deep in conversation. Flora was laughing. She told her maid she wanted to see Alison in the morning and went to bed. She turned on the soft mattress all night trying to get comfortable, trying to forget the sound of Flora's laugh.

Alison came to her room the next day. "I'm glad to hear you're better," she said.

"I wasn't really ill," the princess said. "Just—I don't know—disappointed."

Alison nodded sympathetically. "I know what that's like," she said.

"I'm sorry," the princess said, feeling stupid again. "You must have had much worse disappointments in your life—I mean—I'm sorry. If only I wouldn't complain so much."

Alison nodded again.

"But why are people so cruel to each other?" the princess said. "That maid who laughed at me my first day here—why does she hate me?"

"She hates you because you didn't sack her," Alison said. "That was your mistake. You should have gotten rid of her immediately."

"Because—but why?" the princess said. "I don't understand." But she did understand, or was beginning to. She had been a peasant long enough to know that an aristocrat who let you take advantage, an aristocrat who was easy, was someone to be hated. You hated him or her just because you could.

"Oh, God," the princess said. "What a mess. Should I get rid of her now? She's got friends now, the Lady Flora . . . What do I do?"

"I don't know," Alison said. "I've never been a princess."

"I'm sorry," the princess said. "I just said I wasn't going to complain. How's your revolutionary?"

Alison laughed. "Oh, he's fine," she said. "I think he's gotten enough men to start the uprising." She looked around exaggeratedly and laughed again. They had both long since decided to trust each other. "I'm staying there now, sometimes, though luckily I wasn't there when you sent me your message. He's hiding out in that abandoned fortress near the forest. But—I don't know—I think if he ever decides to go through with it I won't be there. It's time to travel again."

"You won't?" the princess said. "But—I thought—"

"You thought I was a revolutionary too," Alison said. "So did I. But I've watched him for a while now, and I think—well, I think he doesn't love the people so much as he loves himself. That if he does win a war he'll set himself up as king and start all over again. And I've had all the dealings I want with kings."

"Oh," the princess said. "I'm almost ready to think that's too bad."

"My lady!" Alison said, laughing again. "You weren't going to join the revolutionaries, were you? He still asks about you, you know."

"No," the princess said. "Not after what you've told me. Still, it's a disappointment. Just one more disappointment. How do you live with it?"

"Oh, I don't know," Alison said. "You just keep going, that's all. You do the best you can."

After Alison left the princess went down to join her ladies-in-waiting to do embroidery. If everything ended in disappointment then one disappointment was just as good as another. If this was her fate, to sit and sew and wait for her husband to come home from the hunt, then so be it. It could be worse. It had been.

There was a hush when she came in the room and she knew immediately that they had been talking about her. "Sit down, my lady," someone said, and they moved to make a place for her. "I'm glad to see that you're feeling better."

"Thank you," she said.

The talk started up again, words weaving like thread. Stories were taken up, tapestries displayed, the whole panoply of names and dates and countries she had never learned. "And then I said to Lady Flora, I said—" one of the ladies said.

"Hush!" someone else said, with a meaningful look at the princess.

"Oh," the first lady said, as if to say, It doesn't matter what you say in front of her, she won't be here much longer anyway. And a few minutes later the two had started up again, talking in low tones, and once again the princess heard the hated nickname, Cinder Girl.

Something snapped. The princess excused herself and stood up, pretending that her work was finished. She went upstairs to the prince's room and opened his closet, taking out an old vest, a pair of riding-breeches, a shirt that needed mending. She went back to her room and dressed in the prince's clothes, her heart pounding loudly. Then she opened the door and looked out.

The corridor became hazy. Something shimmered like water boiling. A woman dressed in blue the color of a summer evening formed out of the haze. "Good day, my lady," the woman said in a low beautiful voice.

"Hello, Godmother," the princess said. "You're not going to stop me."

"I don't want to stop you, my child," the fairy godmother said. "I'm only here to make you happy. I guess you can't be very happy here—I should have seen that. But you wanted it so badly. What would you like now—the brave young revolutionary?"

"No, Godmother," the princess said. "I don't want anything—I only want to be left alone. When I went to the ball, you promised me I'd live happily ever after. Well, there's no such thing. Nothing lasts forever, not even a prince and a castle and all the jewels I could ever dream of."

"But where will you go?" the godmother asked. "What will you do?"

"I'm going to join Alison in the abandoned fort," the princess said. She was calm now, despite the pounding of her heart. "I think I'd like to travel with her, learn to play a harp for my supper. That reminds me—I should probably take the jewels." She overturned her jewel case and stashed the rings and necklaces and brooches in the vest pockets. "I wish these things had bigger pockets," she said, almost to herself. "And after that," she said to her godmother, "who knows?"

"But . . . happily ever after—" the godmother said.

"I don't want it," the princess said. "Give it to someone else. Give it to Flora, she could probably use it. Oh, don't look so sad. You've done all you can for me, and I'll always be grateful. But right now—" The bell rang for dinner. "I've got to go. Good-bye." She kissed her fairy godmother on the cheek. "Good-bye, and give my love to Flora." She ran down the corridor lightly, happy as she'd been in years. ●

THE ALCHEMIST DISCOVERS A UNIVERSAL SOLVENT

When the moment
nicks my consciousness
keen as a dagger's edge,

fast as the laws allow,
more silent than
the elasticity of bone,

I cross the continuum
and stand beside myself
with senses flaming

and body turned to stone.
For one fractured instant
sand hangs in the glass,

the breath of the forest
catches in its limbs,
a slice of the natural

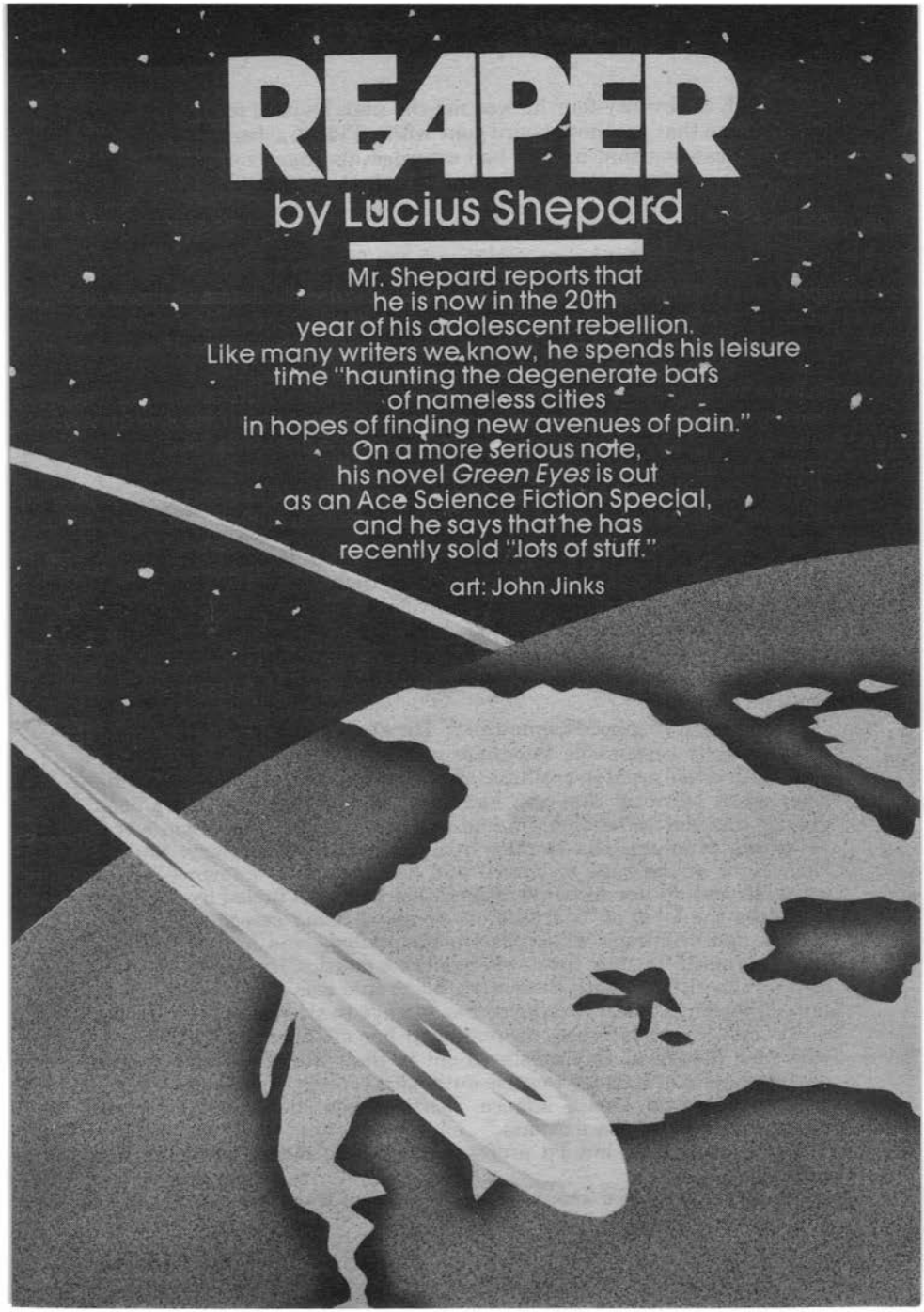
and relative universe
is stretched on the block
with light suspended:

a still life taut
on the lip of a dream,
until the moment turns

and thought is upended:
the forest shakes itself
and time reassumes

its interminate ticking,
the steady dissolution
of all it subsumes.

—Bruce Boston


REAPER
by Lucius Shepard
Mr. Shepard reports that
he is now in the 20th
year of his adolescent rebellion.
Like many writers we know, he spends his leisure
time "haunting the degenerate bars
of nameless cities
in hopes of finding new avenues of pain."
On a more serious note,
his novel Green Eyes is out
as an Ace Science Fiction Special,
and he says that he has
recently sold "lots of stuff."
art: John Jinks

Though at seventy-four he was not the man he used to be, his cheeks sunken and that prophet's beard gone white, Fidel Castro still drove with all the incaution that history had accorded his character; each time he waved his hand to emphasize a point, the jeep would drift onto the shoulder and Julia Mireles—a slender and somewhat more than pretty young woman with long black hair—would find herself staring down at treetops several hundred feet below. Overhead, the forested slopes of the Sierra Maestra were in shadow, their summits gilded by the evening sun.

"It seems mystical," said Castro, shouting over the wind. "This happening so close to La Plata, I mean. That's where my command post was during the Revolution."

"Oh?" said Julia, forcing a smile.

"I suppose it's trite to say it's mystical, considering the religious hysteria in Mexico and now New York." He laughed. "Lights in the sky always bring out the most sincere fanatics."

"What about New York?" she asked.

"Didn't you hear? Ah, that's right! You must have been in transit." He fingered out a cigar from a wooden case on the dash. "Another riot. People proclaiming the end of the world, looting . . . as if possessing a color television or a diamond ring would make them immune to the Apocalypse." He flicked his lighter, the jeep veered, sparks and smoke whirled up from the cigar. "What about you, Julia? Do you give credence to things mystical?"

"I've been too mystified by the quantifiable to think much about it," she said coolly.

"The answer of a good communist!" He winked and patted her knee.

"It's hardly reasonable to equate rationalism and communism," she said with even greater coolness. His paternal attitude infuriated her. Ever since learning that she had fled Cuba twenty-one years before during the Mariel boatlift, he had been treating her as if she were a returning prodigal. His spunky little counter-revolutionary. She had been eight at the time of Mariel and had not really known what was going on; but all her subsequent ambition had been fueled by the desire to escape the label of "Marielista"—to avoid being associated with the misfits and criminals whom Castro had exiled—and by her hatred of Castro himself. Despite his newly moderate politics, the break with Russia and the alliance with the States, his profile was still stamped on the coin of her hatred and it repelled her to have to sit beside him. Dressed in his customary fatigues, he reminded her of those ancient veterans who each Memorial Day mustered out in their ill-fitting uniforms and pledged senile allegiance to some outmoded concept of national pride.

"Well," he said after a silence, "perhaps you should tell me what's quantifiable about these events."

"I have a theory, but I'd prefer to keep it to myself until it's been substantiated."

"If you're concerned about alarming me, you won't. A man my age is prepared for the worst."

"Believe me," she said, turning away, "that's the least of my concerns."

Another fifteen minutes and they swung off the blacktop onto a red clay road that meandered up a mountainside between steep banks; the potholes were filled with rainwater, reducing their speed to a crawl, and they did not reach La Plata until dark. Being a tourist site, it was more prosperous-looking than the typical Cuban village: about thirty white-washed houses with tile roofs and neat gardens and guava trees planted beside them. Spills of yellow light from the windows made the puddles shine like pools of molten metal. Skinny pariah dogs slunk into the shadows, children scampered alongside the jeep, and campesinos stood in the doorways, waving their straw hats. Castro waved back, calling out to those he knew by name. At the end of the road, fifty feet past the last house, stood the old command post. A storage shed, Castro's house—a thatched, wooden structure with a wide door that opened upward to become a porch roof—and a mess hall, also wood, sporting a fresh coat of green paint: Cuban technicians were passing in and out of the building, carrying Julia's equipment. She spent the next two hours helping them set up the lab, and whenever she took a break outside, she would see Castro strolling among the campesinos, joking, accepting glasses of rum and crackers loaded with guava paste. Guava paste, one of the technicians informed her, was Castro's favorite sweet; and having this bit of intimate knowledge about him served to intensify her hatred: it was like discovering that a particularly repugnant animal had adopted a human trait.

It was nearly nine o'clock by the time she finished. Groups of campesinos were standing by their doors, gazing anxiously at the sky. A thin mist had muted the stars into pinpricks. Julia walked toward Castro's house, thinking she could watch from there in solitude; but as she drew near, the coal of a cigar flared on the porch and Castro called out, inviting her to join him. Reluctantly, she climbed the steps and sat in the chair next to his. Faint salsa was issuing from a transistor radio on his lap.

"Just a couple of minutes more," he said. "I thought you'd be up at the microscope."

"It's not operational yet. I told them not to move it into position until after the display. If I'm right, it might be damaged by the . . . the side effects."

"What were you going to say? The what?"

"The Reaper," she said. "I was tired of calling it 'it.' "

"An intriguing name. I'm looking forward to your explanation." He was silent a moment, puffing away, the glowing coal of the cigar illuminating the prow of his nose, the curling hairs of his mustache. "There's not much happiness to be had in the consolidation of power," he said. "I understand that whenever I return to La Plata. It's my home more than anywhere else. The best times were in this house. Sometimes there were only half a dozen of us. Raul and Che, Celia . . ." The name resolved into a sigh, and he laughed embarrassedly. "I'm afraid being here tends to make me overemotional."

Julia said nothing, revolted by his sentimentality; she rejected his right to have such feelings.

"Why do you dislike me?" he asked. "Is it simply because I am who I am, or have I done something to you?"

"What does it matter," she said, too weary to bother denying it, yet not wanting to trivialize her reasons by discussing them with him. "You've probably forgotten, anyway."

"And that makes you even angrier, I suppose?"

A flash of memory showed Julia her mother—a dumpy woman shrouded in widow's weeds—haranguing a crowd back in Miami, urging them to strike down the maniac who had imprisoned and killed their loved ones. What would she do if she were here?

Castro resettled in his chair, and the resultant creak seemed to arise from his chest. "I've tried to remember an enemy named Mireles, but I can't. I wish I could. Perhaps I could explain . . ."

"I'm not interested in your excuses!" snapped Julia.

"I wasn't going to make excuses!" he said, equally angry. "I was hoping that . . ." An odd percussive static overrode the music on his radio, and he looked up to the sky. "It's starting."

High above, rippling veils of auroral light were fading in from the dark, shifting through a spectrum of milky-green to white, hung from horizon-to-horizon; and then, within seconds, as if the edge of an immense knife were being swung against those immaterial folds and dragging them down, the light lowered onto the village, immersing everything in a pale inconstant radiance. Static charges crackled on Julia's skin, the surfaces of her eyes felt parched. Gradually, but in less time than it had taken to accumulate, the light dissipated. A brief tremor swayed the ground. Some of the campesinos fell to their knees, others retreated into their homes, and others yet began to sing an old rebel anthem, as if the proletarian principles it embodied could refute this heavenly menace. And Julia, who of them all had an inkling of its nature, shivered uncontrollably, finding neither principle nor faith to give her comfort.

Surrounded by technicians and blazing arc lights, the electron microscope was positioned against a rock face some fifty feet below the summit of the mountain; the slope beneath fell gently away from a wide ledge. The microscope was a platinum-gray box that would have fit under a kitchen table, and it differed from laboratory models in that the scope contained a device capable of excavating a sample ten thousand angstroms in width without disrupting its structural configuration; the binocular viewer incorporated a microchannel plate that combined the gain of an electron multiplier with the spatial resolution of an image intensifier. Black deposits of magnetite dappled the rock face, and running vertically through these deposits, extending on either side of the microscope, was a hairline stripe of rust-color, so regular that it looked to have been laid in by machine.

For the next half-hour Julia was glued to the viewer, snapping micrographs and taking notes. Several minutes after the beginning of the auroral display, the microscope revealed a split of five thousand angstroms in width running down the center of the discolored stripe; five minutes later the split had narrowed to two thousand angstroms, and after twenty minutes it had vanished. She secured samples of the stripe and hurried back to the mess hall, where she ground away the rock from the plane of bisection and—through consecutive chemical extractions—isolated a magnetite-pure sample, which she analyzed by means of X-ray crystallography. Something had formed a stable matrix with the magnetite; it was organized in a way similar to an ionic compound such as salt, but the bonding was much stronger and far more intricate. This intricacy fascinated Julia. The molecular structure of the matrix had a mathematical elegance that for some reason put her in mind of a course in symbolic logic that she had taken as an undergraduate. She made a note to look into it further . . . if there was time.

As she wrote up her conclusions, she kept an ear cocked to the radio. Nothing but bad news. According to weather satellites, the auroral display had stretched from just below the tip of Greenland, across Cuba, Quintana Roo, and Guatemala, and deep into the South Pacific: this considerably more extensive than the previous night's display. A research vessel in the North Atlantic had recorded an increase in ocean temperature, and one near the Cuban coast claimed to have registered a slight fluctuation in the force of gravity. Riots had broken out in many cities of both North and South America, animals were migrating away from the path of the aurora. Following the news a group of scientists discussed possible causes; their purpose was obviously to soothe rather than inform, but even so they could not entirely disguise their concern. Julia buried her own fear in work. When she had done, seven hours after the display, she put off Castro's demand for an explanation and went to sleep on a cot beside her work table.

She dreamed about the boatlift for the first time in years. It was not a true dream but a memory transposed to a dreamlike frame of reference, varying from reality only by a surreal incidence of white light. Hundreds of boats figured the flat dazzle of the sea, and as they were all sailing at comparable speeds, none of them appeared to be moving. She had the idea they were stuck, that Castro had worked some magic to strand them in this emptiness. People were packed so tightly around her that she could scarcely breathe, and she was crying; she could taste her tears, and she remembered the story her father had told about the foolish knight who had been made wise by drinking his own tears. "Where's Papa?" she asked for perhaps the hundredth time, and her mother just stared out to sea, grim-faced. A big unshaven man next to her mother said angrily, "Tell her! Maybe the truth will shut her up!" And, as if he were in charge of the dream, the scene dissolved and the truth was presented. This was neither dream nor memory, but something she had imagined over and

over through the years: her father nearing the end of his swim from Punta Manati to the naval base at Guantanamo and freedom. He had not been an athlete and he was clumsy in the water, gasping and splashing; a bicycle inner tube was tied to his waist, helping him to keep afloat. The stars laid a faint golden sheen on the water, and—a hundred yards ahead—the naval dock looked a monstrous skeleton floating in light. Blades of the searchlights began to sweep across the surface, fixing on him, illuminating also a black fin coming close behind. . . . A hand fell on her arm, and for a second she thought that her father had reached out of the dream; but as she came blearily awake, she realized it was Castro's hand.

"What are you doing?" She shook him off and pulled the covers up around her neck.

"You were calling out in your sleep. About your father." His gloomy face was as wrinkled as a crumpled rag. "I remember him now. Eduardo Mireles."

She stared at him, too full of hate to speak.

"You can't blame me for that," he said. "I don't control the creatures of the sea."

"Why should you care if I blame you? You've committed so many crimes, one more can't weigh that heavily."

"Crimes? I admit I've done unconscionable things, but you can't rule without letting blood. I've tried . . ."

"I don't want to hear about your moral struggles!" she shouted. "I wouldn't believe anything you said. Now get out! Let me dress!"

He stood and pointed with an unlit cigar to a cup on the night table. "Coffee," he said. "I'll be up at my house."

Mist was packed as thick as cotton wadding in the street, and Julia had to inch her way along to avoid tripping in the ruts and puddles. Castro was waiting on his porch, exhaling prodigious billows of smoke that made it seem he was responsible for the poor visibility. After she had taken a chair, he waved a copy of her report and said, "As I understand this, you're saying that something faster than light is passing back and forth through the earth . . . like a pendulum that's taking a deeper slice each time but always passing through the exact same line. Is that right?"

"More or less."

"Then why aren't people being sliced in half? Why aren't hills and cities being sliced in half?"

"I don't really understand it," said Julia. "It may be composed of neutrinos; they pass through matter without observable effects. Apparently it does no damage except wherever it encounters a deposit of magnetite, and there it causes a split a few thousand angstroms wide . . . probably much wider than the thing itself, because of induction. Unless you had magnetite in your system, it couldn't harm you."

"What's going to happen? What is it?"

"It's left an imprint of itself in the magnetite, but trying to guess what it is from that would be like trying to describe a dinosaur from a chip of bone. I doubt it's a natural phenomenon, though. The accuracy of the targeting is unbelievable. That, and the fact that its path lies mostly over water and lightly populated areas, make me think it's being controlled. As to what will happen . . ." Julia spread her hands in a gesture of helplessness. "Again, I can't be sure. So far we've only had mild earth tremors, but judging from the reports, last night it sliced into the core through magnetite deposits in the crust. It may be that the split heals too quickly to allow serious consequences, but if it holds to its timetable, three days from now it'll totally bisect the earth. God knows what will happen then."

Castro's cigar had gone out; he flicked his lighter, puffed and let smoke trickle from his nostrils. "So, it may well be the end of the world. It doesn't seem possible."

"It's a distinct possibility," said Julia. "Whoever controls the Reaper—if it is being controlled—may have taken its effects into account and designed safeguards. Or they may not be aware of the effects. Or they may not know the planet is inhabited. It could be coming from light-years away."

"You've named it well," said Castro. "A great scythe sweeping down from the stars. Death swinging its sharp edge faster than light. Perhaps the Christians know something after all; perhaps the image of the Grim Reaper stems from foreknowledge or a previous experience with it." He heaved up to his feet, wincing and rubbing his hip. "Twenty years ago I would have been terrified. Now I'm just amazed by the mystery of the thing." He gave a sniff of amusement. "I'll be back tomorrow. I'm going to do a broadcast from Santiago and try to calm everyone down."

"That'll be a switch from rabble-rousing," said Julia nastily.

He had started to walk away, but now he wheeled around, his face darkening. "I'm sick of your insults, little girl! I didn't kill your father. If he hadn't been a fool, he'd be alive today."

"You . . ."

"Shut up!" He came a step toward her. "I won't deny I'm a monster. I've had to be. But just because you don't understand my imperatives, doesn't invalidate them. Look at yourself! Here we are, the race facing possible extinction, and all you can think of is your petty hate, your twenty-year-long pathos. What's your problem? Have you had a sad life, and do you need someone to blame it on? What kind of monster are you?" He opened his mouth to say more, but instead made a disparaging gesture and walked off into the mist.

It seemed to Julia that his condemnation had honed her hatred into keen blades of compulsion that swept out of her interior darkness and, like the Reaper, conjured auroras of violent imagery. She pictured herself

stabbing him while he slept, shooting him from hiding. Yet she knew that she could never bring herself to stab or pull a trigger. It frustrated her that she had no way of purging these feelings, and this set her to thinking about her mother once again. "You had a chance to avenge your father," she would say. "And you did nothing! Nothing! You're no daughter of mine!"

Julia wished that it were true.

When she returned to the mess hall, she threw herself into the work as if it were a kind of violence. She crumpled papers and broke pencils and yelled at the technicians, eventually sending them away. On the radio, sandwiched between news reports, were more discussions about the cause of the aurora; most of the opinions were ludicrous, but one—that of a Guatemalan geologist, who posited that something might be investigating the earth's core, perhaps to determine if a mining operation would be feasible—seemed to bear evidence that her work was being duplicated elsewhere. Her whole life had been passed in study, and now, when life might be ending, it depressed her to think that she was merely taking notes on the process along with hundreds of others. She had missed all the essential experiences—love, children, adventure—and for what? Pointless work, ineffectual hate. Darkness fell. It came to be a little past nine o'clock, and she continued to sit, staring at the walls. Then, as the peculiar static drowned out the radio voices, she heard a sharp hiss from another corner of the mess hall. She went over to the corner and was stunned by what she saw.

The samples of magnetite, which had been resting on a tray, had crumbled into black powder; a number of particles had perforated the edge of the tray that lay between the samples and the path of the split. It was obvious what had happened. As the split had occurred, the direction of the geomagnetic field must have induced a realignment of the ferro-magnetism trapped within the magnetite and the imprinted portion of the Reaper had been released. She carried the tray over to her work table and added a footnote to her report, describing the event . . . and then it dawned on her how this new knowledge could be applied. She jumped up from her stool and began to pace, as if the conception itself had contained a furious energy. God, it would be easy! She could feed Castro a few grains of the imprinted magnetite in the guava paste he liked so much; and, as long as she could keep him close to the split—how close, she was not sure—when the Reaper made its pass, the magnetite-bound portion would burst from his tissues, seeking the path of the split. The exit wounds might not be fatal, but there would be violent organic reactions, not the least of which was that the destabilized geomagnetic field would enter through the wounds and wreak havoc with his central nervous system. It was likely that he would die by electrocution. No, not necessarily. Chances were that the electrical conductivity of the cells would be altered, the permeability of the cell walls affected; they might well absorb an excess of water and burst before electrocution could do

the trick. She made a list of all the things that could happen to his body. It was a very long list.

After a while, she walked outside. The mist had cleared, and a single brilliant star hung below the half-moon. Some of the technicians were standing by the storage shed, laughing, passing a bottle; they called to her and beckoned, but she kept walking, head down, scuffing the clay with her toes. She had a momentary vision of the Reaper—a shining wing slicing down out of nowhere—and she remembered what Castro had said about its mystery. It had been the allure of such mysteries that had led her to science, and now, the fact that she intended to use this one—the most astounding one she had encountered—for the purpose of murder: it caused her a degree of self-loathing.

"Hello," said a voice to her left. A teenage girl wearing a school uniform—white blouse and blue jumper—had fallen into step beside her. "My name is Carmela. May I talk with you?"

Julia shrugged, not keen on the idea of company.

"I'm doing a report on the United States for school. I hoped you would tell me about it."

The girl's enthusiasm made Julia weary. "It's like most places," she said. "Nothing special."

"If that's true," said Carmela, "then why did you leave Cuba?"

"We were exiled."

"Truly?" Carmela was incredulous. "For what reason?"

"My father was against the government. He was killed trying to swim to Guantanamo. The sharks took him." Julia was startled to feel wetness on her cheeks. She felt no grief. It was as if the tears were a reflex or for show, as if she had cried herself hollow over the years.

"Oh," said Carmela; she glanced around nervously to see if anyone was listening.

There was a jeep up ahead, parked by one of the houses, and as they drew near, Julia saw the keys dangling from the ignition. She stopped walking.

"You're very pretty," said Carmela, steering clear of controversy. "Do you have a boy friend?"

"No," said Julia. No one, she wanted to say, except a mother who sits ringed by photographs of the dead, who smells of church candles, who dresses in black and thinks in black. She climbed into the jeep and fired the engine. A column of her mother's blackness was jetting up inside her, sending her thoughts into erratic orbits around it.

"What are you doing?" asked Carmela, alarmed.

"I don't know," said Julia, engaging the gears.

Someone shouted for her to stop, but she paid them no mind. She concentrated on the potholes, the wild menagerie of leafy shapes that bloomed in the headlights, and when she reached the highway, the pour of the wind acted to blot out her confusion. The gravities of the curves seemed to be reshaping her. Finally she came down out of the mountains

and saw a sprawl of lights on the horizon; soon afterward she passed beneath a sign that read BIENVENIDOS A SANTIAGO. The town consisted of low stucco buildings and narrow streets and the smell of the ocean. On the wall of the post office was a garish mural featuring the handsome face of Che Guevara; some teenage boys with beards like Che's were leaning against it, as if they were hoping to be subsumed by the paint, to take a permanent stand beside their hero. Near the harbor Julia found a tourist place, the Club Cielito Azul. She parked and went in and sat at the bar. It was like the lowlife clubs in Little Havana. Whores wearing silkskins, narcotic candles. A sex machine—a huge plastic sarcophagus molded into the shape of a voluptuous woman—stood by the men's room door; its eyes glowed red to signify that someone was inside. The heads of the crowd were silhouetted against the hot stage lights, and on stage, their skins glistening, a gymnerotics team—six young men and women—was performing a comic routine, bouncing in and out of one another to the tune of synthesized *sproings* and pops. Everybody was watching, but nobody was laughing.

Julia drank four scotches in rapid succession. An American man oozed up to the bar and sat next to her. Thirtyish, blond, a dumpling belly. He paid for three more drinks, flashing a wallet stuffed with bills; he obviously thought she was a whore, and to bolster the impression she spoke in broken English. His name was Allen, he was a robotics salesman, and he kept saying "It's the end of the world, *chica*" as a preface to lewd suggestions. He slipped his hand into her blouse to cup her breast, and she was surprised by how good it felt. She could no longer taste the scotch, the lights were smeary. The gymnerotics team achieved a slapstick climax, tumbled off-stage, and syrupy music welled from the speakers. Allen dragged her onto the dance floor and clamped his hands to her buttocks, grinding her against him. "I think," she said drunkenly, dropping her accent, "that you should tell me you love me. I mean, hey, it's the end of the world." He drew back, startled. She pulled him close and told him what she would do if he were her true love. "I love you," he said, trying to arrange his features into an expression of sincerity. "I do, really." She laughed, not only at him but at the falsity of her abandonment, her dizziness.

"Julia!" said someone behind her.

She disengaged from Allen and turned, unsteady. Castro was standing there, frowning, flanked by two soldiers.

"Hey, Fidel," she said cheerfully. "You come here often?" She giggled and made a gesture that included all the decor. "So much for the Revolution, huh?"

"I'll take you back to La Plata," he said.

"Oh, no! I've already got a date." But the dance floor had emptied, and Allen was nowhere to be seen.

"Come, Julia." Castro reached out for her.

"Murderer," she said absently.

One of the soldiers lifted a hand to strike her, but Castro caught his arm.

Julia wobbled away, laughing. "I meant me, stupid," she said. "I was just trying it on for size."

Early the next afternoon Castro visited Julia at the mess hall to inquire about her hangover.

"I'm all right," she said. "I'm sorry about last night."

"No one else is keeping their head. Why should you?"

She tapped a pencil against her lips, deciding. "Will you have dinner with me tonight?" she asked, feeling spiderlike, sinister.

"I can't. I'm doing another broadcast." He arched an eyebrow. "Why would you want to eat with me?"

"You were right the other day. I've been petty"—she pretended confusion—"and I want to make peace. Perhaps we can have dinner tomorrow night, if you're going to be here."

"I'll be here," he said. "But I'm going to send everyone else back to be with their families. Just in case. And I'd planned to send you back to Miami."

"I'd feel better if I could stay here and keep working."

He hesitated, then smiled. "Very well. I suppose it's fitting that enemies come to terms at times like these."

After he had gone, she collected samples of magnetite from the rock face and spent the rest of the afternoon reducing them to a pure form. The molecular structure of these samples was slightly different than the previous samples, but she was too involved with her plans to bother investigating them. The radio announced volcanic eruptions in Guatemala, a major earthquake near the Arctic Circle in Russia, more riots. She hardly registered the reports; she was operating in a kind of luminous dispassion, a mood that overbore all moral compunctions and clearly displayed the prerequisites for successful action. A test of the method was necessary: she did not want to diminish her satisfaction by worrying about its effectiveness.

Shortly before nine o'clock, she took a pound of hamburger from the refrigerator in the mess hall and salted it with particles of magnetite; then, as the campesinos began to gather in the street, she walked to the edge of the village, luring a pariah dog to follow by the smell of the meat. It was a slat-sided, dirty-white hound with a brown splotch saddling its back and open sores speckling its belly; but its miserable condition accentuated rather than diminished her feelings of guilt. She climbed up beyond the rock face to the summit, where the rusting, skeletal tower of Radio Rebelde—Castro's transmission point during the Revolution—was canted at an extreme angle. The scarp on which it stood was moonstruck, and the dog's eyes were gleaming, as were the strings of drool hanging from its jaw. It looked at her expectantly and growled. She rolled a ball of hamburger and tossed it onto the ground about—she judged—twenty

feet from the path of the Reaper, approximately the same distance that lay between the split and the mess hall. The dog wolfed it down and growled again. She tossed out another ball and glanced at her watch. Less than fifty seconds. The light was so bright that the valley below shone a silvery green and the folds of the surrounding peaks were demarked by sharp shadows. A third growl, a third ball of hamburger. Ten seconds. She ducked behind a stony projection and counted them off.

Suddenly there was a frying sound, and for an instant the dog appeared to inflate. Then it exploded. A spray of blood whipped across Julia's face; she lost her balance and fell back, striking her head on the base of the tower. When she opened her eyes, the uncanny light of the aurora was all around her. She looked over at the dog. Scraps of charred meat were scattered about a headless skeleton to which smouldering black sinews were still attached. She scrambled to her hands and knees, and was violently sick. After her stomach had emptied, she sat beneath the tower and—thinking that she would soon have to see worse—forced herself to look at the dog again. She gagged, but after a moment the sight became abstract. It might have been a grotesque charcoal sketch, an architectural schematic for some new construction in Hell. It was tolerable. She was revolted by what she had done, yet no less determined to do the same to Castro; in fact, she was disheartened by the swiftness of the death. She doubted that the sharks had been as merciful.

At noon on the following day, a team of scientists in Guatemala went public with their findings about the Reaper; they had, indeed, been working along the same lines as Julia, and they had gone her one better in that they claimed to have discovered its purpose. It was, they said, a message, a massive burst of information transmitted from an extra-solar point of origin. Essentially it was a cosmic printing job; the specifics of the message were encoded within the molecular structure of the matrix that the Reaper had formed with the earth's magnetite. The news distressed Julia, because she realized that she might have reached these conclusions had she not been otherwise occupied. The scientists also claimed that language computers had managed to translate a portion of the message, isolating the concepts of "peace" and "imminence" from the pattern; in light of this, they suggested that the transmission was out of control, that its deleterious effects were accidental, and, optimistically, they promised to have more translated by the morning. Julia, who was not so optimistic, listened for a while to reports of riots and earthquakes; then she switched off the radio and started preparing Castro's dinner.

He did not return until twilight, and for the next hour and a bit he strolled up and down the street, joking with the campesinos. Saying his goodbyes. It was after eight by the time he entered the mess hall, and the first thing he did, before she had an opportunity to savor the event, was to eat two crackers spread with guava paste. "Where did you buy this?" he asked. "It's gritty." He had a forty-five automatic strapped to

his waist, and—popping a third cracker into his mouth—he removed it and laid it on Julia's table. "I almost couldn't get back. Santiago's gone crazy. Have you been listening to the radio?"

"Yes." Julia stared at him, fascinated. He was a dead man, and she half-expected a symbol of death to materialize on his brow.

He pulled a transistor radio out of his pocket. "Everyone's gone crazy. Except here. The villages of the world. They're used to poor expectations." He switched on the radio. The announcer was speaking excitedly about tidal waves, martial law; the Russian orbital telescope had reported that a band of radiation—a second Van Allen belt—was forming around the planet. Castro sighed ruefully. "What do you think? Will we survive it?"

"I'm not sure." Julia did not meet his eyes. "It could be much worse already."

"Are these crackers all we're having?"

"I didn't know when you wanted to eat," she said. "It's too late to cook now."

He laughed. "Listen to us! We sound like husband and wife."

Julia checked her watch. Less than forty minutes. She tried to say something, but her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth.

The news ended and a rhumba began to play. Castro switched off the radio and returned it to his pocket. "I told them to play music when the time came near," he said. "There's no point in letting the newsmen babble right up to the final moment." He ate another cracker. "Did you hear about the Guatemalan group?"

She nodded.

"Amazing, isn't it? A word pronounced a galaxy away is splitting us apart with its syllables. I hope those bastards up there have something important to tell us. All the way back I was wondering where it came from. What it said. Was it just a complicated 'Hello' or a distress call. A warning? Have a race of fanatics discovered a great truth and beamed it to the sky? Or was it meaningless? A wrong number dialed on the interstellar wavelength . . ."

As he talked, continuing to eat the crackers, Julia grew more and more nervous. All the sly delight and viciousness she had felt in setting the trap had evaporated, and she was eager for it to be over. He talked nonstop, rambling from topic to topic, and she began to have a strange sense of him: his shaggy head seemed a lump of history that had eroded into a face and beard. In effect, she was on the verge of blowing up a statue, defiling a monument. And, should there be any further history past a few minutes after nine, she would be a footnote to his existence, an ant crawling across his pedestal. She checked her watch again. Nineteen minutes. She was wholly devoid of satisfaction.

"I hope you don't mind me talking," he said. "Everyone's got some defense against fear, and talking's mine." He brushed a crumb off his beard. "I can't figure out what yours is, though. How are you staying so calm?"

"I'm not calm," she said. "I'm thinking."

He drummed his fingers against his knee. "Do you know why I wanted to have dinner with you tonight?" he asked after a moment, and before she could respond, he went on—"Because of Mariel. I won't try to judge myself. Maybe it was the right thing to do in some ways. But my . . . my lover, my best friend, had just died, and I wasn't acting like a statesman or a leader, but like a man. If people didn't want to be here, let them go! To the devil with them! That was how I was thinking." He gave a dismal laugh. "Anyway, I thought perhaps I could atone for that by helping you get through tonight. But there you sit, calm as a rock. You don't need help. Ah, well! There's no point in dwelling on regrets or recriminations at a time like this . . ."

He was off again, and Julia wished he would be quiet. His hoarse voice was filling her head, as if God had turned up the volume. She did not want him to be talking when the Reaper passed, because his hoarseness would become shrill, rise into a burning note that would express the life searing out of him. A tightness was building in her chest, and she could not stop thinking about the dog. She leaped up off the stool and walked to the door. Castro's jeep was parked just outside.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"I'm . . ." She could hear the ticks of her watch. Eleven minutes. "Nothing."

"If you've got something to say, I wouldn't wait. Only about nine minutes left."

A sense of desperation engulfed her. "You must be fast. I've got eleven minutes."

"Two minutes more or less doesn't change what's possible." He stared at her inquiringly.

Her mother's face reared up in her mind's eye. Obediently, Julia went back to the stool and sat down. Then, as if her mother could hear, she said, "Damn you."

"What did you say?" asked Castro. A hectic flush was spreading across his cheeks, and his wrinkles appeared to have deepened.

"You're going to die if you stay here," said Julia, and as she spoke, the tightness in her chest dissolved.

He looked at her askance. "We may all die."

"I did something to you. I don't have time to explain, but no matter what happens to the rest of us, you'll die if you're near the split."

His face hardened with suspicion. "What are you up to?"

She saw the gun on the table. She drew it from the holster and clicked off the safety and pointed it at him. "Get in the jeep."

"You won't shoot," he said.

She pulled the trigger. The kick jammed her elbow, but she managed to hold onto the gun; the bullet chewed splinters from the wall behind them. "I swear I will," she said. "I'd rather see you die that way than how it's going to be."

He backed through the door, and she moved after him. Half a dozen campesinos with rifles were heading toward them, and when they saw Julia and Castro, they dropped to their knees and set their weapons to their shoulders. Julia climbed into the jeep, keeping the gun trained on Castro. "Get in and drive!" she told him. "Stay back!" she shouted to the campesinos. "Or I'll kill him!" Castro fired the engine and they eased out along the street. All the campesinos were standing in their doorways, their faces stony; one old man spat at Julia. There were shouts behind them, a shot, and a bullet *pinged* off the fender. Julia ducked her head and prodded Castro with the gun. "Faster!" she said. The jeep bounced and shuddered, the headlights veering wildly. Castro hunched over the wheel, intent on the road; but as they negotiated a sharp turn a mile or so below the village, he spun the wheel and ran the jeep into the bank.

Julia's head cracked against the dash, white lights shot back into her skull, and the next she knew she was lying underneath Castro, smothering in his sour old man's smell. He had hold of her wrist and was trying to take the gun, which was still clutched in her hand. His breath was sobbing. Julia clawed at his face with her free hand, and he pulled away just enough so that she was able to wriggle out from beneath him. She went sprawling onto the ground; a sliver of pain jabbed into her side. He crawled out after her, his teeth bared with the effort. Blood eeled from his hairline. She fired over his head, and he stopped.

"Why don't you get it over with," he said, gasping. "You'd better hurry or the job might be done for you."

Julia glanced at her watch. The crystal was shattered, and the minute hand was stuck on the twelve. "Run!" she shouted.

He hauled himself to his feet and slumped against the fender. "You did do something to me, didn't you? Am I going to die?"

"Run!"

"I can't!" His face was ashen in the moonlight.

She fired again, just missing, and he staggered off downhill, his arms flailing. Julia set out after him, intending to harry him along, but it hurt to breathe and something was grating in her side. She had trouble keeping pace. Castro went around a curve, and by the time she made the turn, he had already rounded the next one. She slowed to a walk, holding her side. Moonlight silvered the road, the shadow-filled ruts looked like snakes frozen in mid-writhe. A sudden increment of pain caused her to stumble, and as she regained her balance, the aurora bloomed overhead.

It lowered onto the summit, and from this distance she could see how it followed the contours of the surrounding slopes: a white curtain of force dividing the world. She waited for it to vanish, but it did not. It grew brighter, its veils rippled faster and faster. The ground heaved—no mere tremor—and she was flung into the bank. There was a rumbling beneath her, and the roadbed was twitching like the skin of a cat tormented by fleas, tossing her about. She dug her fingers into the clay and stared up at the mountaintop. The aurora was burning with such intense

brilliance, an iridescent white, that it seemed she could see phantoms moving within it, blazing nightmare shapes, as if the demons trapped in the earth had been released to join the chaos of its ending. She covered her head with her hands and screamed, admitting to all the fear she had been suppressing, expecting the ground to crack open and swallow her, expecting everything to crack . . . her own flesh, dust motes, atoms. A fine grit was in the air, a roaring in her ears. Her mind went shriveling down a black tunnel of fear, and she was still screaming after the last tremor had subsided. She remained flat on the clay, her eyes squeezed shut, certain that this was only a brief respite before a final, sundering shock.

All the unimportant sounds of the night returned. Wind sighing, insects sizzling in the weeds, mosquitoes whining around her head, and—most improbably—the faint sweetness of a rhumba. She sat up. Everything looked unchanged, normal. Gritting her teeth against the pain, she got to her feet and set out toward the music along the moonlit road. Two curves further on, Castro was sitting by the bank, his radio beside him. Blood from his scalp had trickled down and stained a patch of his beard. Julia sank to the ground a few feet away. An agitated voice blatted from the radio, advising everyone to stay tuned for important bulletins; then the music resumed. Castro pointed at the mountaintop. Outlined by the stars, the summit had a new truncated shape, and where the lights of La Plata should have been, there was only darkness.

"What a strange spell this thing has woven," he said gloomily. "If you hadn't tried to kill me, we might both be dead. And perhaps that would have been for the best." He wiped his eyes; then he patted his pockets, trying to find a cigar. Finding none, he pulled out his lighter, flicked it, and gazed into the flame as if it held an oracle. "Why did you save me?"

The place where Julia kept her answers was wrapped in numbness, and she could only shake her head. She leaned against the bank. Pain stabbed into her side, and she let out a gasp.

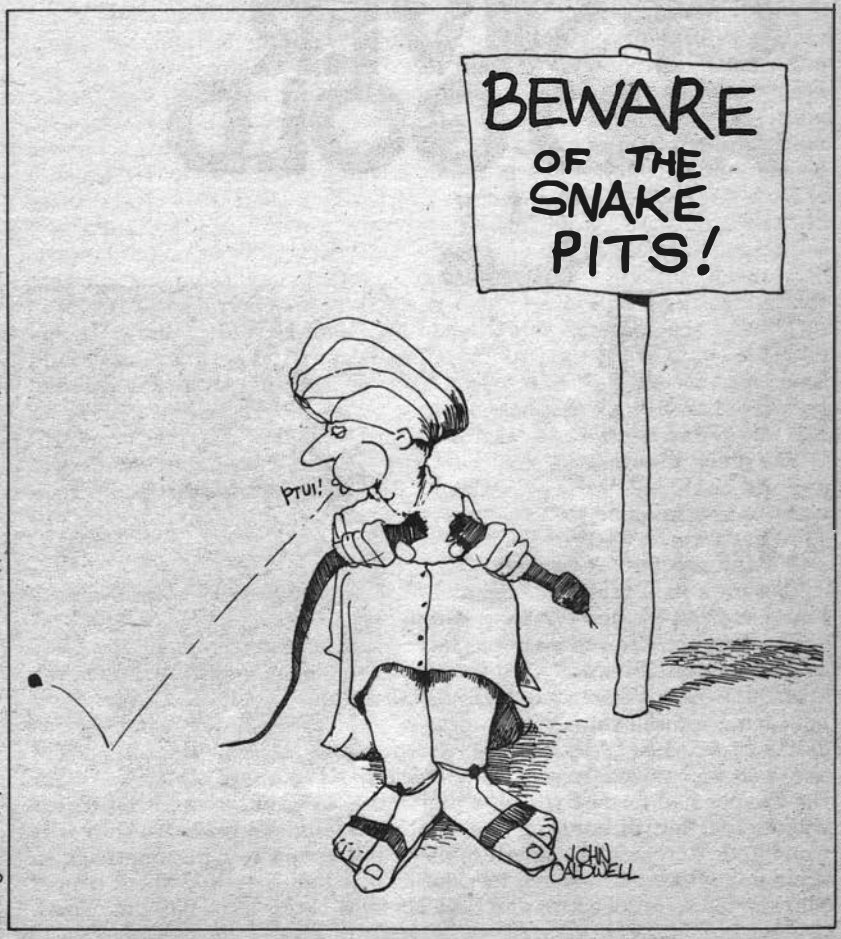
"What's wrong?" asked Castro.

"I think my ribs are broken."

"Let me rest a minute more, and I'll bring the jeep." He drew up his knees and put his head down on them.

The rhumba ended, merging into a tango. Julia shifted to a more comfortable position and tried to breathe shallowly and looked up at the stars. Thousands and thousands of stars. And, she noticed, more were appearing all the time. New points of golden light were winking into existence overhead, spreading across the sky in an intricate pattern that she soon recognized: it was the molecular structure of the matrix that the Reaper had formed with the magnetite. Peaceful imminence. There was no fear left in her, and she wanted to laugh. What were they, she wondered. A race of bunglers come in peace and causing breakage in their puppylike enthusiasm for contact? Or had they lied about peace? She started to tell Castro, and then thought better of it. Not yet. There

was mystery overhead, heartbreak above in La Plata, God knows how much heartbreak out in the world; but despite this she felt clear-headed, buoyant, as if a poisonous weight had no longer found her compatible and flown back to its source. She wanted to savor the feeling. An unfamiliar emotion was swelling in her. She was afraid to give it a name—it had been so long since she had known it—and yet, though it might merely be relief, a momentary consolation for the horror of the night, it almost seemed like happiness to be sitting here at the brink of an uncertain future, with her old enemy beside her and the radio still playing its sweet music of another time. ●



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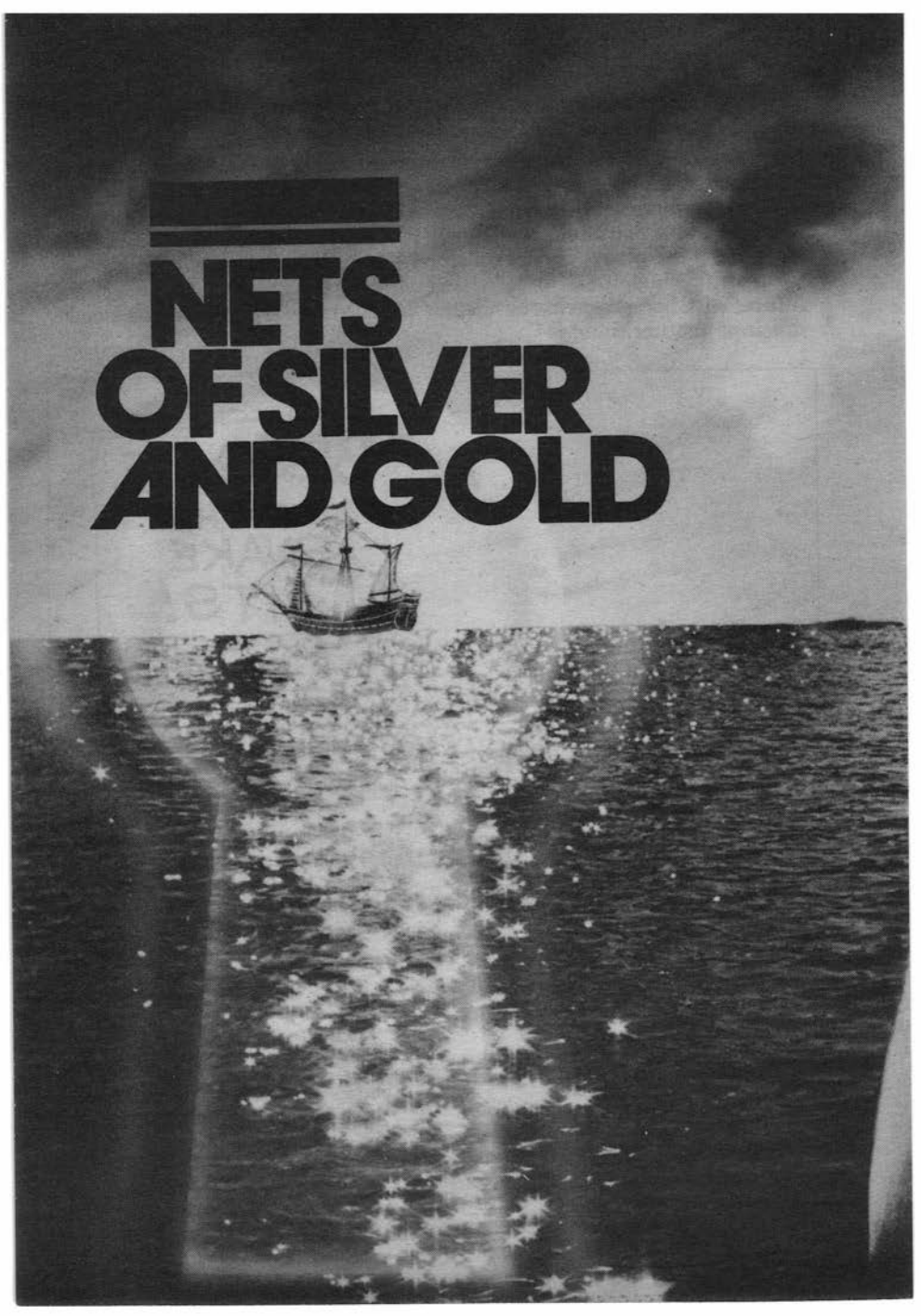
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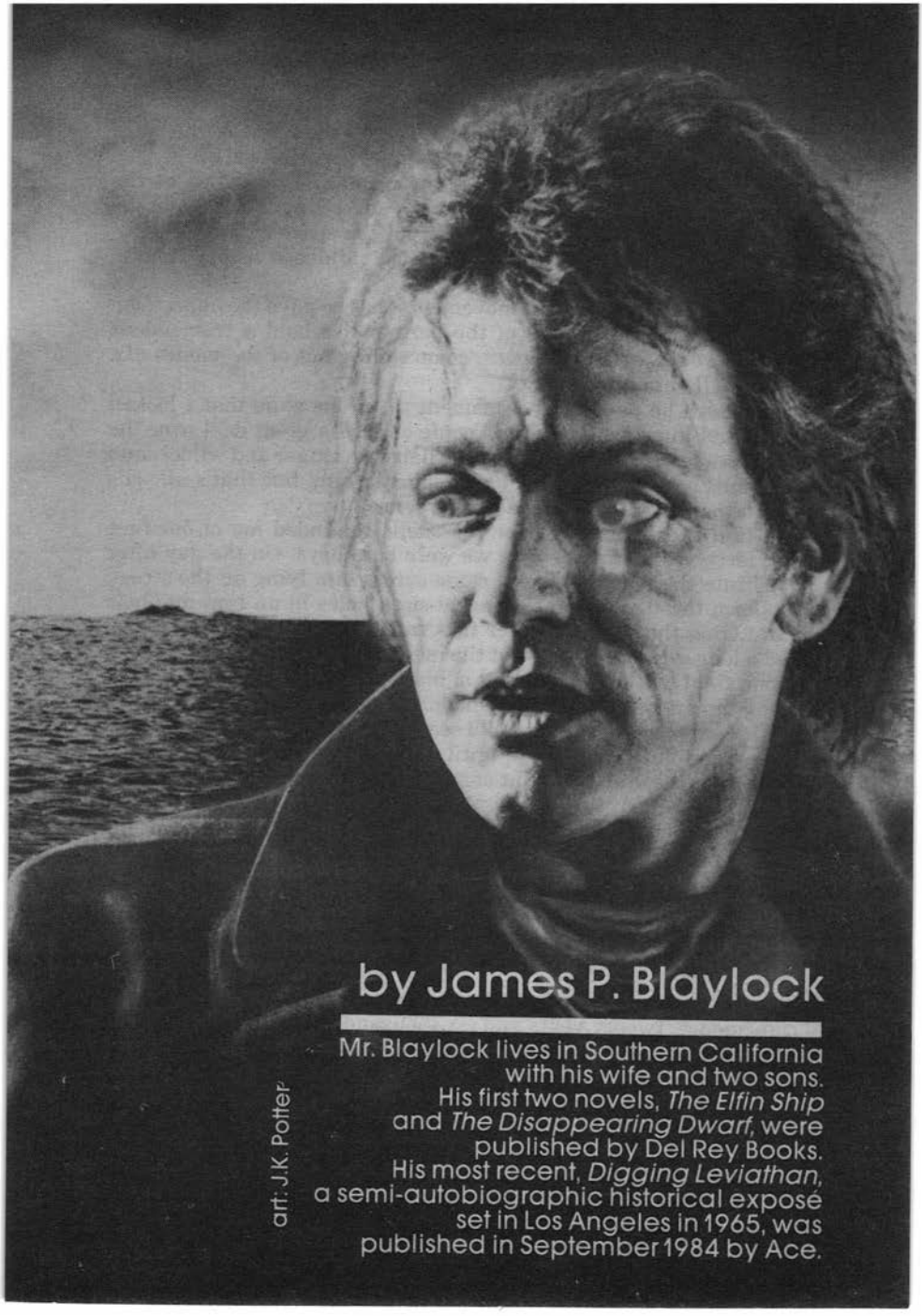


by James P. Blaylock

art: J.K. Potter

Mr. Blaylock lives in Southern California with his wife and two sons. His first two novels, *The Elfin Ship* and *The Disappearing Dwarf*, were published by Del Rey Books. His most recent, *Digging Leviathan*, a semi-autobiographic historical exposé set in Los Angeles in 1965, was published in September 1984 by Ace.

My wife and I were traveling along the Normandy coast when we met John Kendal in St. Malo. It was in a hotel café—the name of the place escapes me. He sat before a tremendous plate of periwinkles, all heaped into a little seashell monument. With a long needle he poked at the things, removing the gray lump inside each and piling it neatly on the opposite side of the plate. He worked at it for the space of half an hour, and in that time I had no idea it was my old childhood friend Kendal who sat there.

So intent and delicate were his movements that he gave the impression of someone suspicious that one of the periwinkles held a tremendous pearl, which would, at any moment, come rolling out of the mouth of a dark little shell onto his plate.

It wasn't until he paused for a moment to sip his wine that I looked at his face and knew who he was. People change a great deal over the years, but Kendal, somehow, hadn't. His hair was longer and wilder, and he was twenty years older than I remembered him, but that's all. His antics with the periwinkles made perfect sense.

Seeing him there laboring over the shells reminded me of our first meeting, forty years earlier when we were both boys. On the day after I'd moved into the neighborhood I came across him lying on the street, peering down through one of the nickel-sized holes in an iron manhole cover, watching the rippling water that ran along below the street and reflected a long cylinder of sunlight that shone through the opposite hole. He told me right off that he did most of his water gazing on partly cloudy and windy days when the passing shadows would suddenly darken and obscure the water below and he could see nothing at all. He'd wait there, gazing down into utter darkness, until without any warning the clouds would pass and the diamond glint of sunlight would reappear, sparkling on the running water.

It was all a very romantic notion, and I took to practicing the art myself, although not nearly as often as did Kendal, and always vaguely fearful that I'd be run down in the road by a passing car. He had no such fears. The sunlit waters implied vague and wonderful promise to him that I sometimes felt but never fully understood.

And here he was eating periwinkles in St. Malo. He was living there. I haven't any idea how he paid his rent or bought his periwinkles and wine. It didn't seem to matter. Nor did it surprise him that we'd met by wild coincidence, twenty years and six thousand miles distant from our last meeting in California. We hadn't even communicated in the intervening years.

As we sat into the evening and talked, I was struck by the idea that he'd become eccentric. Then it occurred to me that he'd been eccentric at eight years old when he'd spent his free time peering through manhole covers. What he'd become, I can't for the life of me say. My wife, who sees things more clearly than I do, understood immediately, even as she watched him manipulate his periwinkles, that he was slightly off center.

Not the sort who goes raging about the streets with an axe, but the sort who doesn't even acknowledge the street, who looks right through it, who inhabits some distant shifting world.

That isn't to say that my wife disliked him. He won her sympathies at once by carrying on about the sunsets at St. Malo, sunsets which, for two days running, we had missed because I hadn't had the energy to walk from the railway hotel to the old city. He could see them, he said, from his window, which overlooked the sea wall and the scores of rocky little islands and light towers that stretched out into the ocean along the coast there. It was spectacular, the sun sinking like a ball of wet fire into a sea turned orange. It seemed to set purely for the amusement of the city of St. Malo. He had the notion that if he could find just the right sort of rowboat—the wooden shoe of Winken, Blinken, and Nod or the pea-green boat of the Owl and the Pussycat—he could catch the sun as it set and follow it into the depths of the sea.

The next afternoon my wife and I drank a beer at a café above that same sea wall and watched the sunset ourselves. I'll admit that Kendal was right—not a half-mile of green sea rolled between the rocky shore and the sun when it set. There are legends, or so we were told, that when the old gods fished from the rocks off St. Malo, one of them cast his golden net with such force that it encircled the sun. Thinking that he'd ensnared a great glowing fish, he hauled it almost into shore before realizing his error and setting it free. The sun had been so taken with the beauty of the coastline thereabouts that it has since followed that same path every evening when it sails from the sky.

It's quite possible that Kendal had heard the same tale and that his nautical pursuit of the setting sun was suggested by it. All in all it doesn't matter much, for it's just as likely that if he had heard the myth, he half believed it. He had the uncanny ability to make others believe such tales too, just as he'd imbued me with a sense of the importance of watching that sunlit water beneath the street, for reasons that I can't at all remember, reasons that have never been defined.

So we talked that first evening over wine and food, and I discovered that he'd never given up the business of watching, of peering through holes. He told us that he had taken for the summer the most amazing rooms, directly above the sea wall. They were in the oldest part of the city, all stone and hand-hewn timber. He'd been told by the landlady that at one time, hundreds of years ago perhaps, his room had attached to it a stone balcony, thrusting out over the ocean beyond a heavy, studded oak door. The stones had long since broken loose and fallen into the sea, and the old door had been nailed shut against the possibility of someone stumbling through it drunk or while sleepwalking, and dropping the thirty-odd feet into the tide pools below.

There was a keyhole in the door, however, encrusted with verdigris, through which one could peer out over the sea. Kendal, it seemed, spent a good deal of time doing just that. He could as easily have watched the

sunsets through either of two long, mullioned windows in the same wall, but that, he quickly insisted, wouldn't have been the same thing. There was something about keyholes—about this particular keyhole—something he couldn't quite fathom.

My wife, not knowing him as I did, insisted that he explain himself, and his story, I'm afraid, went a ways toward overturning the romantic notion she'd formed of him after his eloquent description of the sunsets.

He had been in the rooms a week before he even saw the keyhole. He was engaged, he said, in certain studies. The view from the windows was such that his eyes were inevitably drawn to and through them toward the sea so that he paid little attention to the old door. One afternoon, however, he'd been sitting at his desk working at something—I haven't the foggiest idea what—when he noticed through the corner of his eye that a thin ray of sunlight slanted in through the keyhole and illuminated a little patch of carpet, evoking, he said, old memories and fresh anticipation. There was nothing for him to do but peer through the keyhole.

Shimmering beyond was an expanse of pale green ocean which joined, at the abrupt line of the horizon, an almost equal expanse of blue sky. It wasn't at all an odd thing to find, quite what he'd expected, but the simple symmetry of the sea and sky with their delicate Easter egg colors kept him at the keyhole for a bit, waiting, perhaps for a gust of wind to toss the surface of the sea or for a cloud to drift into view. As it happened, a sailing ship appeared, just spars and rigging at first, then the tossing bowsprit as the ship arched up over the horizon. He hadn't any idea what sort of ship it was; he knew nothing, he told us, of ships. But it was altogether a wonderful thing as it appeared there with its billowing sails and complexity of rigging and looking for all the world as if it had sailed in from another age.

He leapt up and dug about in his wardrobe for a pair of opera glasses, then returned to the window to have a closer look at the antique ship. But there was, he insisted, no ship there. It must have swung around and sailed back out to sea—curious and unlikely behavior, it seemed to him.

Out of sudden curiosity he peered once again through the keyhole, but there was only the sea and the sky lying placidly, one atop the other.

He had suspicions, he said, about the keyhole, suspicions that had been fostered years before. He half felt as if the keyhole had been waiting there for him, impossible as that sounds on the face of it, and he determined, quite literally, to keep an eye on it.

His determination faded, however, as he became once again involved in his studies. He was standing at the window late the following afternoon, thinking about the sunset and toying with the idea of going down to the cafe for a cup of coffee. He felt a bit of a fool, he said, for his suspicions about the keyhole, and he decided that it was time to lay them to rest. So he crouched before it and peered through, seeing, to his wild

surprise, not ocean and sky and sailing boats, but a study, his own study: the littered desk between cases of books, the rose-colored armchair beside a tobacco stand, the ungainly pole lamp standing like an impossible stilt-legged flamingo with a hat on. He determined to keep watch, not to look away and so lose it like he had lost the incredible ship. He'd wait, he said, until something happened, anything.

But then he began to wonder at the odds and ends heaped on the deak. They were all familiar; nothing was there that shouldn't have been. But he couldn't be sure—he couldn't swear that the millefiori paperweight, an old French globe that was the only thing of real value he owned, wasn't in the wrong spot. There it was on the left of the desk, sitting atop a copy of *Mr. Brittling Sees it Through.* Yet he was almost sure that behind him it lay next to a bowl of oranges on the right. He could picture it in his mind. It sat opposite Mr. Brittling, not atop it.

It began to irritate him, like an itch that he couldn't quite reach. He had to know about the paperweight, and yet he was sure that if he turned, even for an instant, his mysterious keyhole study would sail off in the wake of the disappearing galleon. When he finally gave up and looked away, it seemed to him that he saw, just out of the corner of his eye, the study door begin to swing open as if someone were pushing in through it. But the momentum of rising carried him off, and when he peered through again, after just the slip of an instant, there was the tranquil sea, broken just a bit by little wind waves, and the blue expanse of sky interrupted by the rag-tag end of a fleeing cloud.

He'd been right about the paperweight. He was possessed thereafter with wonder at the nature of that keyhole. You and I would have been concerned with the nature of our minds, with our sanity, but not John Kendal. Just the opposite was the case. For a week he crouched there, spending long hours, squinting until he got a headache, seeing nothing but sea and sky and, in the evening, the setting sun. He'd sneak up on it. He'd act nonchalant, as if he were bending over before it to pick up a dropped pencil or a bit of lint from the carpet. But the keyhole, he said, couldn't be fooled. He even tried whistling in a cheerful and foolish manner to add credence to his air of unconcern. At night there was nothing but darkness beyond, darkness and a little cluster of stars. Later yet a glint of moonlight shone through maddeningly, only perceptible if the room were dark and if he stood just so, somewhere near the northeast corner of the study.

Bits of fleeting doubt began to surface toward the end of the week, the suspicion, perhaps, that he'd been the victim of a particularly vivid dream brought on by an overabundance of periwinkles, which, apparently, he ate by the bushel basketful. It occurred to him that his compulsion was very much like that of a peeping tom, and that his studies were woefully neglected. Finally he simply grew tired of it. He resolved late one Saturday night that he'd had enough, that he'd made a fool of himself and that he'd quite simply put the matter to rest by having nothing more to

do with it. He'd shove a wad of chewing gum into the thing if he had to, buy a key and leave it in the hole so as to block the little cylinder of sunlight that filtered in. It was the sunlight, after all, that set him off. It was all very clear to him. Psychology could explain it. He was searching for that same sunlight he'd become so familiar with as a child. Well, he'd have no more of it.

So he sat there, pretending to be reading in his chair, but thinking, of course, of the keyhole—knowing that he was thinking about it and denying it at the same time. He wondered suddenly, irrationally, if the keyhole knew he was thinking about it, and if he hadn't ought to lazy along over toward it and have one last peek—just to put the issue to rest, to dash it to bits. He could see just the faintest silver thread of watery moonbeam slanting in, vaguely illuminating that bit of carpet.

He rushed at the door, casting his book down onto the armchair, pulling his pipe out of his mouth. He'd been tormented long enough. He'd have one last look, just to satisfy himself once and for all; then he'd stuff it full of something, anything—wet paper, perhaps, or a wad of sticky tape.

Through the keyhole once again was his study. His book lay on the armchair. The telltale paperweight wasn't on the desk at all. It was in the hand of a woman with whom he was utterly unfamiliar. She had the complexion of a gypsy, he said, and the most amazing black hair and dark eyes. She was watching someone, that much was certain, smiling at someone—at him?—in a pouty sort of way. It was maddening. He shouted through the keyhole at her, something which must have sounded amazing and lunatic to his neighbors. A moment later there was a shuffling outside his study door, as if someone had come to investigate and was working up the courage to knock. He looked up quickly, cursing, fearing the disturbance that didn't come. And when he returned to his keyhole a moment later, there was, of course, nothing but the dark sea and sky and a few cold stars around a gibbous moon. The study and the gypsy were gone.

He was quite convinced that they weren't in any true sense gone; that they were real couldn't be argued. He became possessed by the idea that if the contents of his study existed on both sides of that door, then the dark woman with her pouty smile did also. It was merely a matter of time, he was sure of it, before he'd turn a corner on his way to the café or the railway station and catch sight of her. It wouldn't surprise him if he bumped into her at the market. He could picture it very plainly; her packages scattering, he apologizing, scooping them up, she with a look of vague recognition on her face, wondering at him, at their chance meeting. Dinner, perhaps, would follow. Or more likely she'd go along on her way. Then, a week later, a month later, he'd board the bus for Mont St. Michelle and there she'd be, beside an empty seat. It would be fate and nothing less.

At the time of our chance meeting over periwinkles, of course, fate hadn't yet played its hand. She never reentered either of the two studies.

Kendal, however, spent more time than ever at his keyhole. He had no more misgivings. And he was rewarded for his faith, mostly by the sight of an empty, book-scattered room.

Once, early one morning, he peeped through and, with a thrill of strange apprehension, saw himself at work at his deak, writing madly, scribbling things down. Papers lay on the floor. His hair was tousled. He wore his salmon colored smoking jacket, the one with Peking dragons on the lapels, and it appeared as if he'd been up all night—assuming, of course, that the of world the keyhole operated according to the same clock time as our world. But then who could say that it wasn't our world? Kendal wondered at first what in the devil he was working on with such wild abandon. It seemed to be going very well indeed, if the thirty or forty pages on the floor weren't scrap.

He watched himself write for a time, hoping, he said, for the return of the dark woman. He was possessed by the idea that she was his lover. His manic writing paused and he sat back in his chair and tamped a bit wearily at his pipe, blowing first through the stem to clear it out. He swiveled round, bent over, closed one eye, and peered, to Kendal's sudden horror, at the keyhole. In a fit of determination he slammed his pipe into an ashtray, rose, and strode across toward the old door, bending and peering, his eye hovering not three inches from the eye of his shellfish-loving counterpart. For one strange moment, said Kendal, he didn't know absolutely who he was, or which study he occupied. He pinched himself, trite as it sounds, and convinced himself that he, at least, was no figment. "Hello!" he shouted. "There *is* someone here! You're not imagining things!" It felt good to reassure himself. "You're perfectly sane!" he shouted a bit louder. The eye disappeared. There was a knocking at his study door which nearly tumbled him over backward. For one sudden moment he'd been certain that the knocking had come from the door into the other study. But it hadn't. There was another knock, and when he opened the door and looked out into the hallway, there was his landlady, giving him the glad eye. She looked past him into the empty room, nodding to him, asking him some contrived question about the rent. He shook his head and was brusque with her, he said, which was unfortunate, because in truth she was a friendly sort. Her concern was justifiable. He hurried her away and bent back across to his keyhole.

The study beyond was empty. The papers on the floor had been gathered into a heap that lay beside the desk. Obviously they weren't trash. It had been a productive night, the sort that gave him a great deal of satisfaction, a sense of wellbeing. He watched the empty study for an hour, waiting there, and was surprised to see, suddenly, a widening patch of sunlight playing out quickly across the floor, as if someone were opening a door and a quick rush of daylight were flooding in. Just as suddenly it was cut off. It wasn't the study door that had opened in the room beyond; he could see the edge of it quite clearly off to the left of the desk. And it wasn't curtains being drawn; he hadn't any curtains. No, a door

had been opened, that much was sure, and there could be no doubt which door it was.

He paused in the telling of his story and filled his glass. He'd worked himself into a state. His hand trembled. My wife raised her eyebrows at me, but Kendal didn't see it. He was lost in his tale. He ordered coffee and heaped sugar into it, begging us not to assume that he'd gone mad.

"Of course not," said my wife. "Of course not."

"What I saw," he continued, gazing into his coffee, "were little men."

My wife choked on her wine. It wasn't hard to guess why, but she made a grand effort to make it seem otherwise. Kendal held up a knowing hand and shook his head quickly, as if he were satisfied with her disbelief. I put on a serious face. "Little men?" I said. "Midgets, do you mean?"

He shrugged.

What he had seen at first were the shadows of whoever had come through the old door. He wondered, straight off, where they had come from. After all, he had been peering through a keyhole in the door in question. There was, it seemed, a door beyond the door, and perhaps others beyond that—countless others—a veritable mirrored hallway of reflected doors with little men creeping about down the corridors, and dark women stealing out of one door and through another, and doors creaking open to reveal the wave-tossed galleon slanting in toward a rocky shore. Kendal saw endless possibility, but he hadn't enough time right then to be anything but mystified by it.

One of the little men, as he insisted on calling them, began to haul volumes out of the bookcases, tossing them around onto the floor. Another picked up the piled papers, rummaged in the desk drawer for a scissors, and began cutting paper dolls—strings and strings of them. Another wrestled several pages away, found a pencil, and set out to doctor up the manuscript, chewing the end of his pencil, laughing and scribbling away. Yet another appeared, to Kendal's horror, opening the liquor cabinet and yanking out bottles, examining labels, nodding over them with a satisfied air. Pieces of clothing flew into sight, tossed, no doubt, from the closet by a fifth and unseen vandal. His favorite tweed coat shot out, folding over the shade of the pole lamp and hanging there sadly as the liquor-cabinet elf squirted at it with the soda water siphon. It was a sad state of affairs. Any possible humor in the scene was dashed by the certain fact that it was *his* rooms being ransacked, that it was his tweed jacket that lay now in a sodden heap on the floor beside the overturned lamp. One of the devils juggled the paperweight along with two oranges. He was wonderfully dextrous. Kendal held his breath. The one who had been at his clothes wandered in with a hammer. He snatched one of the oranges from the juggler, set it atop Mr. Brittling, and smashed it to pulp. Then he made a grab for the paperweight. Kendal was stupefied. The juggler dropped both the weight and the orange and they rolled out of sight

behind the armchair. A struggle ensued, one elf poking the other in the eye and yanking at his hair, the other threatening with his hammer, fending the first off. They collapsed onto the carpet and went scrambling out of view. Kendal watched in futile horror the head and upper handle of the hammer rise and fall three times above the back of the chair. He shouted into the keyhole, screamed into it, whacked his fist against the door. There was a general pause within. He'd been heard. He was quite sure of it. The elf with the soda water bottle hunched over, squinting toward him, stepping across on tiptoe as if he were the soul of secrecy, and with a mad grin he aimed the siphon at the keyhole.

Kendal leapt to his feet. He wouldn't, he said, stand the indignity of it. He felt as if he were a character in a foolish play, as if a crowd of people were watching, laughing at his expense. (My wife pinched me under the table.) He waited for a moment, fully expecting soda water to splatter through the keyhole. Nothing happened. He was sure, he said, that they were hovering there, that when he looked again they'd all be waiting, laughing, would squirt him in the eye. But when he could stand it no longer, he peeked through and saw no little men, no study, no gypsy temptress—only the sea and the sky and, to his amazement, the old galleon, sails reefed, riding on the calm water a half mile off shore.

He sat most of the rest of the day in the café above the sea wall, watching the sun fall. He could see, from where he sat, the old studded door that opened into empty air, and he tried to convince himself that if he squinted sharply enough or turned his head just so, he could make out phantom shapes, figments, ghosts perhaps, fumbling around outside that door, carrying on.

He knew, he said, that he should be recording all this business about the keyhole—writing it down. In print, perhaps, the pieces would fall into order. He could look at it with an objective eye, get his bearings. The more he thought about it, the more necessary the task became, and late that evening he returned to his rooms, sat at his desk, and began to write. He scribbled feverishly, casting finished pages over his shoulder, littering the floor. He speculated and philosophized. As it grew later his ideas and the events that prompted them seemed to deepen in importance, as if the night was salting the affair with mystery. Some of it, he insisted, was shamefully maudlin—the sort of thing you write late at night and pitch into the trash in the light of day.

Early the next morning he found himself empty of ideas, seated at his desk, dressed in his smoking jacket with the Peking dragons on the lapels. It was only then that the thought struck him—the idea that he was being watched through the keyhole, that he was watching himself.

"What does all this mean?" he cried, facing the studded door. There was, of course, no response. He snatched up a clean sheet of paper and a pen. "Write a message," he wrote. "Roll it up and poke it through the keyhole." He stood before the desk holding it up so that if indeed he were watching just then he'd get a good look at it. It was a brilliant idea. He

waited for a bit but nothing happened. He stepped across and peeked through the keyhole and was rewarded with the sight of the ruined study. The little men had gone and had quite apparently taken his liquor with them. He tore off excess paper from around his note and rolled what was left into a tight little tube. Then he twisted it even tighter and threaded it through the keyhole, shoving it past the far side with the end of a coat hanger. When he peered into the keyhole again the study had vanished.

He was exhausted, he told us, from the ordeal. He decided at first to sleep, not so much out of the need for it, as to be on hand if the little men appeared. But then he vowed that they wouldn't hold him in thrall. He'd go about his business. Let them play their pranks! If he caught them at it he'd make it warm for them. They'd sing a sorry tune. He'd force them, he said, to take him along aboard the galleon. Just to play devil's advocate he drank two quick fingers of his best Scotch—they wouldn't have all of it—and he went out onto the street, locking the door behind him, and spent the better part of the day walking; one eye out for the gypsy girl with the pouty lips.

Some time around two in the afternoon he began to grow anxious. He remembered, suddenly, the sight of the hammer rising and falling beyond the armchair, and he cursed himself for not having slipped the paperweight into his pocket. There was nothing for it but to return at once—to make sure. His wandering about town had accomplished nothing anyway. If he was fated to find the dark woman, then he'd find her, or she him. He might as well be anywhere. He hurried along, and as he drew closer to home he became more certain of what he'd find. As it turned out, he was half correct.

His study was a mess. The tweed coat was a ruin, sprayed with soda water and crushed orange. His papers were reduced to snippings and his books littered the floor. *Mr. Brittling Sees it Through* was the sorriest of the lot. The liquor cabinet was empty but for a half bottle of creme de menthe from which the cap had been removed. He was furious. He stormed back and forth, nearly stumbling over the remains of the broken paperweight that had somehow been knocked under the sleeve of his soaked coat. It lay in two neat halves, the edges of several glass canes protruding through the broken sides like little pieces of Christmas candy. The hammer from the shelf in his closet lay beside it..

Kendal raged about, trying to think, waving the hammer over his head. He strode toward the door, understanding what it was he had to do. And it was then that he saw what he hadn't expected to see: a little rolled and twisted bit of paper lying right at the edge of the carpet. He unrolled it, shaking. "Write a message," it read. "Roll it up and poke it through the keyhole."

"By God!" he shouted. "We'll see!" And he began to pry out the nails that held the door shut. It wasn't an easy thing. Not by a long sight. He had to rather beat the door up to get at them. But he was determined—he'd come to the end of his rope. One by one they squeaked loose. He paused

after the fourth to peer through the keyhole, and there was the sun, the sky, a cloud. Below lay the sea, calm and glistening and dappled with sunlight, broken by a long rowboat in which sat five little men, one at the tiller and four more pulling on the oars, making away toward the setting sun and the galleon anchored off shore, heaving on the ground swell.

He wrenched at the nails. He tore at them. He knew it would do him no good to go to the windows. He couldn't get at them through the windows. He peered through the keyhole again. The rowboat was a speck on the water. Finally the last of the nails pulled loose, and, shouting, he pushed the door outward on its hinges with such a rush of relief and anticipation that he nearly pitched out into the open air. He caught himself on the old jamb and hung on, searching the horizon for the galleon. There was nothing there. At the café below him, a dozen idlers gawked up, puzzled, wondering at his antics. He couldn't be sure, he said, which world they occupied, so he searched for himself on the veranda, but didn't seem to be there. Slamming the door shut, he hurried down and asked them about the elves in the rowboat, but the lot of them denied having seen anything. They winked at each other. A fat man with ruined shoes laughed out loud. Kendal raged at them. He knew their kind. Did they want to see what those filthy devils had done to his rooms? None of them did.

Kendal poked idly at his sea shells, stirring them around on their plate. He had calmed down a bit later, he told us, regretting his folly. The people in the café would think him a wildman, a lunatic. My wife shook her head at that. "Not at all," she said, hoping to cheer him. He shrugged in resignation and emptied his coffee cup. From the pocket of his coat he pulled a crystal hemisphere, his antique paperweight, and he showed it to us very sadly, pointing out certain identifying marks: a peculiar pink rose, a glass rod with a date in it—1846 I believe it was. The top of the thing was spider webbed with cracks where it had been struck with the hammer. It seemed to us that Kendal could hardly bear looking at it, but that he had it with him as a bit of circumstantial evidence.

After the shouted accusations in the cafe, he'd walked about town again, searching, and had ended up at the restaurant in our hotel, eating periwinkles. It was there that we found him.

He'd been fairly bouyant, wrestling with his shellfish and sipping wine, and, as I said, his discussion of the sunsets was engaging. By the time he'd come to the end of his tale, however, he was as deflated as a sprung balloon. He looked very much like a man who hadn't slept in two days. We started in on another bottle of wine, and he toyed with the idea of eating more shellfish and spoke desultorily about his mystery, now and then breaking into rage or rapture. He seemed particularly enthralled by the possibility that the little men had heard him shout at them, could

quite possibly have squirted soda water into his eye through the keyhole. It seemed to hint at connections, real connections. He had pretty well run himself down when on the sidewalk outside, in the glow of the arclamps, a little knot of people hurried past. One was an olive complected woman with long black hair and deep, dark, round eyes and full lips. She looked in briefly (as did several of the others) as she walked past, disappearing quickly into the night.

Kendal sat for a moment, frozen, with a wild look in his eye. He jumped up. I wanted to protest. My wife clutched my arm, encouraging me, I suppose, to dissuade him. Enough was enough, after all. But I wasn't at all sure that he hadn't every reason to leap up as he did. He shouted his address to us as he raced out of the restaurant, forgetting entirely to pay his bill, which had amounted by then to about thirty-five francs. We settled it for him and rose to leave. There on the table, shoving out from beneath the cloth napkin, was the broken crystal paperweight with its little garden of glass flowers. I dropped it into the pocket of my coat.

I revealed to my wife, as we walked down the road toward the sea, Kendal's youthful predilection for gazing down manhole covers. There had been other habits and peculiarities—rhinestone and marble treasures that he buried roundabout in his childhood, drawing up elaborate maps, hiding them away and stumbling upon them years later with wild excitement and anticipation. I recalled that he'd once gotten hold of an old telescope and spent hours each evening gazing at the stars, not for the sake of any sort of study, mind you, but just for the beauty and the wonder of it.

My wife, of course, began to develop suspicions about poor Kendal. I produced the broken paperweight and shrugged, but she pointed out, no doubt wisely, that a broken paperweight was hardly evidence of a magical keyhole and of little men coming and going across the sea in an old galleon that no one but John Kendal could see. I put the paperweight away.

Next day we were both in agreement about one thing—that we'd look Kendal up in his rooms. My wife affected the attitude of someone whose duty it was to visit a sick friend, but I still suspect that there was more to it than that; there certainly was for me. We decided, however, to wait until evening so as to give him a chance to sleep.

We found ourselves eating supper at the café that had figured so prominently in his story. We sat outdoors in a far corner of the terrace where we could see, quite clearly, Kendal's studded door. I admit that I could perceive no evidence of any ruined balcony—no broken corbels, no cracked stone, no rusty holes in the wall where a railing might have been secured.

We finished our meal, left the café, and followed cobbled streets up the hill. Quite truthfully, I felt a little foolish, like a Boy Scout off on a snipe hunt or a person who suspects that the man he's about to shake hands with is wearing a concealed buzzer on his palm. Part of me, however,

not only believed Kendal's story, but very much wanted it to be true.

We found his rooms quite easily, but we didn't find Kendal. He wasn't in. The door was ajar about an inch, and when I knocked against it, it creaked open even farther. "Hello!" I shouted past it. There was no response. "I'll just tiptoe in to see if he's asleep," I told my wife. She said I was presuming a great deal to be sneaking into a man's rooms when he was out, but I reminded her that at one time Kendal and I had been the closest of friends. And besides, he'd quite obviously been despondent that previous evening; it would be criminal to go off without investigating. That last bit touched her. But as I say, there was no Kendal inside, asleep or otherwise. There was quite simply a mess, just as he had promised.

He'd made some effort at straightening things away. Half the books had found their way haphazardly onto the shelves; the rest were stacked on the floor. The tweed coat lay in its heap, and I'll admit that the first thing I did when I entered the room was to feel it. The top had dried in the air, but it was still wet beneath, and stiff with the juice and pulp of squashed orange. On the desk lay the copy of Wells's *Mr. Brittling Sees it Through,* covered with the remains of a second orange. His liquor cabinet sat empty but for the uncapped bottle of creme de menthe. The old half of the broken paperweight lay canted over atop the desk. Clothing littered the floor about the door of the closet. All of it bore out Kendal's tale.

Protruding from the keyhole in the old door was a twisted bit of paper. My wife, as curious by then as I was, pulled the thing out and unrolled it. Written on it in block letters were the words, "I must speak to you." In what time or space they'd come to be written, I can't for the life of me say. It was impossible to know whether the message was coming or going.

My wife pushed open one of the big mullioned casement windows and I looked out at the setting sun. She called me over and pointed toward the tidepools below. There, among anemones and chitons and crabs, floated a half dozen bits of paper, some still twisted up, some relaxed and drifting like leaves. In another hour the tide would wash in and carry them away.

On impulse I bent over to have a look through that keyhole, a thrill of anticipation surging within me along with vague feelings of dread, as if I were about to tear open the lid of Pandora's box or of the merchant Abudah's chest. I certainly had no desire to have *my* tweed coat pulped with oranges, and yet if there were little men afoot, coming and going through magical doors. . . . Well, suffice it to say that I understood Kendal's quest in quite the same ethereal and instinctive way that I understood his peering down holes in the street forty years earlier.

So I had a look. Just touching the dark sea was a vast and red sun. Silhouetted against it were the spars and masts of a wonderful ship, looping up over the horizon, driving toward shore. And rowing out toward the ship, long oars dipping rhythmically, was a tiny rowboat carrying

a man with dark, wild hair. On a thwart opposite sat the olive-skinned woman. I'm certain of it. That they were hurrying to meet the galleon there can be no doubt. They were already a long way from shore.

"Do you see it?" I cried.

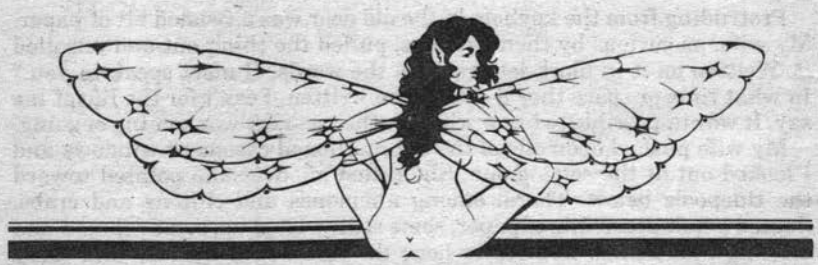
"Yes," said my wife, supposing that I was referring to the sunet. "Beautiful isn't it?"

"The ship!" I shouted, leaping up. "Do you see the ship?" But of course she didn't. Through the windows there was no ship to be seen. Nor was there any rowboat. "Through the keyhole!" I cried, "Quickly."

To humor me, I suppose, she had a go at it. But there was nothing in the keyhole but the tip of the sun, just a tiny arched slice now, disappearing beneath the swell. She stood up, raised her eyebrows, and gestured toward the keyhole as if inviting me to have another look for myself. Nothing but cold green sea lay beyond, tinted with dying fire.

We left a note atop his desk, but either he never returned, or he hadn't the time or desire to visit us at our hotel. I suspect that the former was the case. Our train left for Cherbourg next morning.

We haven't seen him since. It's possible, of course, that we will, that his travels will lead him home again to California and that he'll look us up. He has our address. But as for myself, I rather believe that we won't, that his course is set and that his travels have lead him in some other direction entirely. ●



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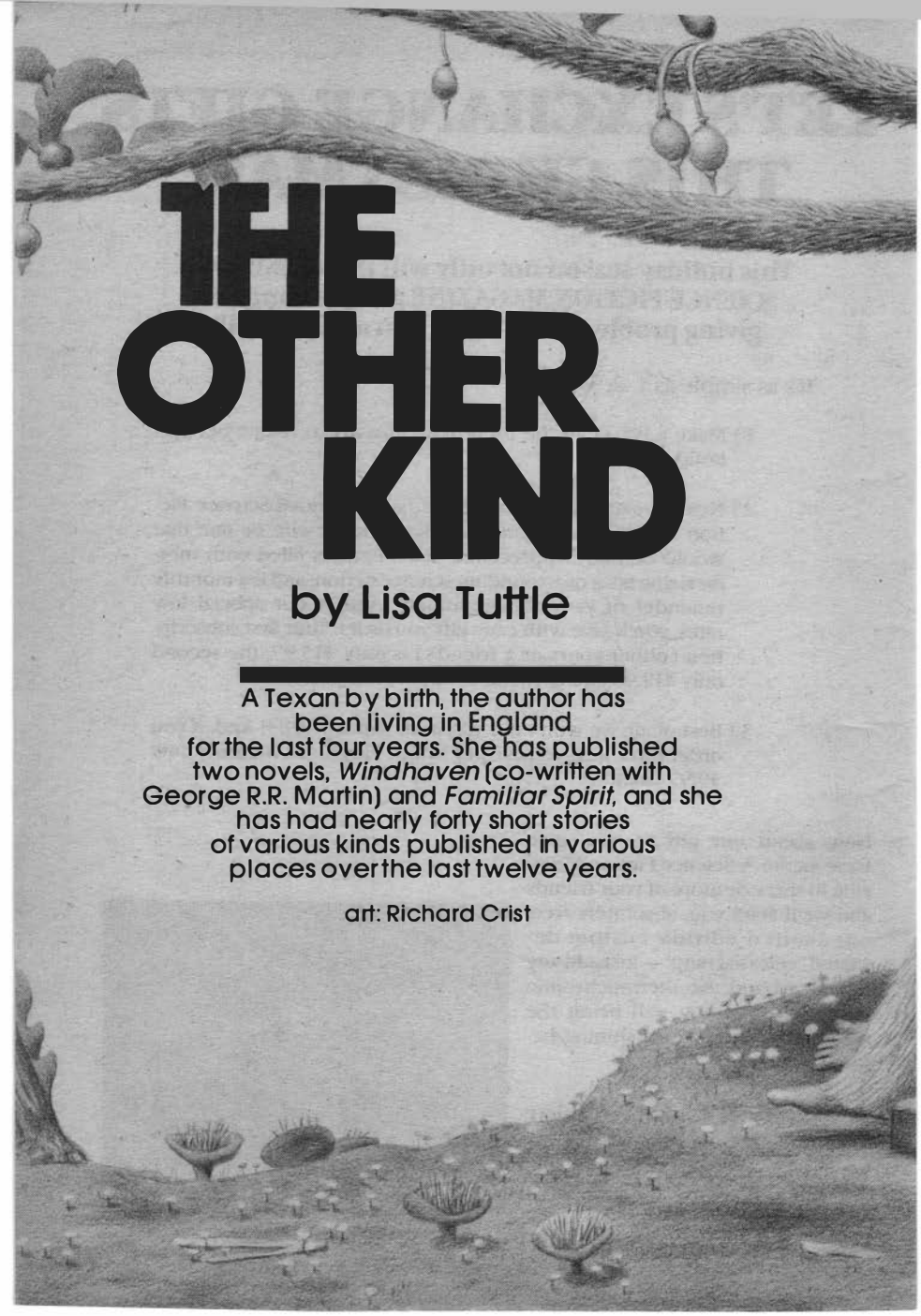
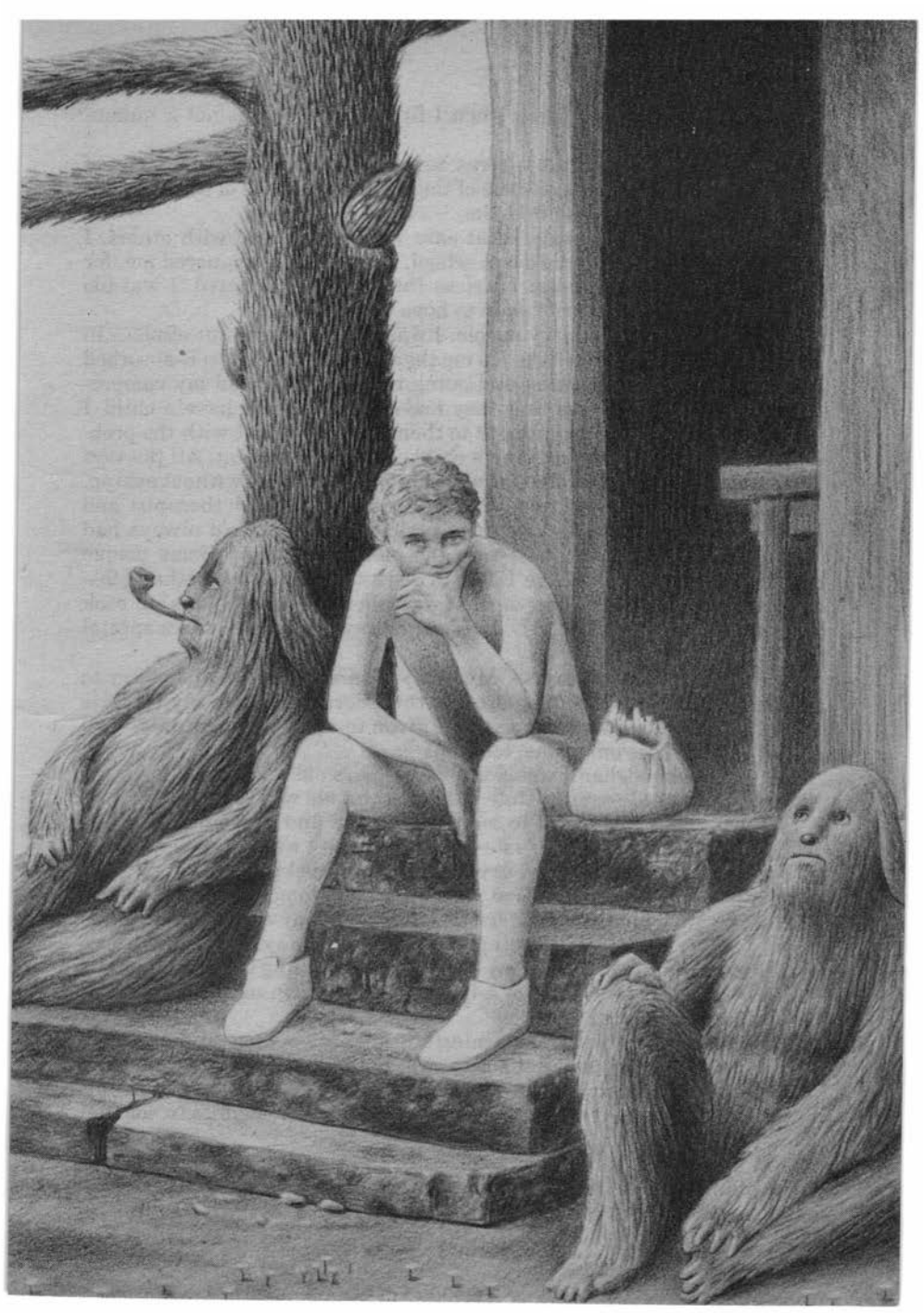


THE OTHER KIND

by Lisa Tuttle

A Texan by birth, the author has been living in England for the last four years. She has published two novels, *Windhaven* (co-written with George R.R. Martin) and *Familiar Spirit*, and she has had nearly forty short stories of various kinds published in various places over the last twelve years.

art: Richard Crist



I don't know how old I was when I first realized I was not a human being.

Oh, my body was human—I was born to human parents, citizens of Keemah and descendants of some of the earliest colonists of Ederra—but that was by some freakish mistake.

As a boy I was miserable, ill at ease with myself and with others. I was clumsy at games and slow in school. Other children ignored me, for the most part; were kind or cruel as their natures dictated. I was too aware of my own inferiority even to hope for a friend.

My parents were ordinary people. I was the only piece out of place in their carefully regulated lives. To me they seemed distant, self-absorbed beings, mysteriously coming and going in a world beyond my comprehension. The wonder was that they had ever decided to have a child. I must have been a disappointment to them, but they dealt with the problem efficiently. I had everything a child could need or want. All the toys and treats my peers clamored for were bestowed upon me without asking. I had special tutors, special lessons, sessions with a speech therapist and psychologist and even, for one brief period, a nanny. We'd always had servants, of course, but they were the mechanical kind. Some people might draw upon the native Ederran work-force, but my mother's fastidious nature made the idea of what she called "alien creatures" to cook or clean for us abhorrent. My Ederran nanny, therefore, was a special concession.

I called her teddy, of course. My teddy. There are those who object to the term, claiming it is degrading to the Ederrans, but to my ear it is fond and childish, a tender nickname given to nameless creatures. "Ederran," after all, is our name, too.

My teddy came when I was four or five years old and stayed for some brief, unreckonable span of time. Her effect on me was to be life-long.

She was the whole world to me, all I wanted and all I knew. For the first—and, I now know, the last—time in my life I was truly happy. I sat on her lap, doing my best to bury my ugly, naked skin in her lush, silky fur while she patted and rocked me through the long, silent afternoons. She never minded when I tugged at her soft, floppy ears, or rode imperiously on her back, commanding her to turn this way or that, but those games were merely breaks in my real life, when I clung to her in timeless silence, losing all awareness of self in her faint, warm scent and the beat of her heart; at peace.

And then one day, without warning or explanation, my paradise ended. My teddy went away and did not return. Perhaps this was by command of the psychologist, perhaps my mother's squeamishness was responsible. Perhaps my parents were afraid of losing me to her, unable to see that I was already lost.

Now you're beginning to recognize me; the elements fall into place to form a familiar case history. Alienated as a child by emotionally distant parents, isolated from peers by physical handicaps (speech impediment,

manual clumsiness, a tendency to overweight), driven to cling to and identify with the one positive source of warmth in a cold world; later, of course, the sexual difficulties . . .

Of course, the sexual difficulties. I was never attracted to my own kind, either male or female. There was nothing even vaguely erotic to me in smooth, furless skin, in the constant eruption of words and sounds, in the sweaty athletics that passed for lovemaking among human beings. I did not know how to cope with the sexual urges which assaulted me in my miserable adolescence. Alone in my bed, or locked into a dark closet, I would fondle myself and imagine that the hands which stroked my genitals were rough-palmed and softly-furred on the backs. Reaching orgasm, I smelt again the distinctive musk of her, and the heat that suffused my body might have come from the close embrace of my teddy.

But even for a timid, solitary adolescent an imaginary lover could not be satisfactory forever. I remember when the idea first came to me; I was riding the rails home from school, reclining in a padded seat and staring without interest at the tape loop which traversed the wall of the capsule: a dreary playlet extolling dental hygiene. I kept watching in an attempt to blot out awareness of the other passengers in the capsule, a boy and girl of about my own age, blissfully uncaring of my presence as they fondled each other, panting and moaning.

When the capsule doors unsealed at my station I rushed out, hot, bothered, and vaguely envious. They were lucky, those two lovers, in having each other. My eyes fell upon a shaggy figure rubbing a soapy brush in careful swipes against the tiled white wall of the station. I stared at the laboring Ederran and felt a longing so powerful I nearly fainted. People pushed past me and someone swore; I was blocking the walkway.

Somehow, I began moving again and made my way up to the street, but I might as well have been sleepwalking. Outside the cold air cleared my head somewhat, and I could think again. I knew what I wanted now: I wanted a teddy.

I was in a street of shops, and their tinted glass fronts winked and sparkled at me like jewels. I wasn't ready to walk the few short blocks home and face my parents, so I moved slowly along the street, pausing to look into each shop window. Instead of the merchandise I saw myself, reflected in emerald or ruby hues.

I hated myself, hated the way I looked: tall and plump and blond, my face and body hairless. My face was perpetually unhappy, the down-turned mouth and deepset eyes giving me a faintly petulant look which irritated adults. In a sudden flash of despair I wondered how I could inflict the creature that I was upon some innocent Ederran. I might be failing my class in human sexuality, but I had learned a few things from it which reinforced what I already knew from holodreaming. I knew that bestiality was wrong because animals were innocents who could not give their consent to sexual use by human beings. The Ederrans were some-

thing more than mere animals, but were not on the same level as human beings.

And yet people did have intercourse with Ederrans—I knew that. Ederrans were sexually receptive to human beings. Although they never initiated encounters, they seemed to welcome and enjoy human sexual advances. They were not, therefore, poor dumb victims, but neither were they suitable partners. Ederrans might mingle with us doing menial jobs, but at night they went home to their own. There could be no meaningful intellectual contact between human and Ederran any more than there could be cross-fertilization.

Still the fruitless, frowned-upon mating was common. Human-Ederran intercourse was not actually prohibited: people who made a habit of it might be shunned, but they would not be punished. I had experienced the subject many times in holodreams. A common theme, particularly in comedy, was the fumbling first attempts of a human adolescent, learning about life with a large and willing teddy.

The thought cheered me. After all, *I* was an adolescent learning about life. I looked around with new interest as I turned homewards. The sky was the muddy yellow-brown common to the season of mists, but that afternoon was cool and clear, the fresh air giving no hint of the damp, heavy fog which would descend in an hour or so. The tall, thin Obalil trees swayed almost constantly in the breeze, the lizard nests in the lowest branches making sounds like the clicking of castanets. There were a few people out, some on the moving walkways and other taking exercise on foot or bicycle, but I saw no Ederrans. This was not unusual, for in such a residential area the only Ederrans would be the occasional housekeeper or gardner hard at work, but I was disappointed. Having made up my mind to take one as a lover, I was ready to tumble forthwith into the shelter of some hedge with the next Ederran I met.

My parents were entertaining friends when I arrived. Normally I would have rushed past them to my room, to wrap myself in another holodream, but the sight of a low table spread with food made me realize I was hungry. When my father invited me to join them, I did—to his obvious surprise.

As I sat down I stuffed a piece of cake into my mouth to save me from having to say anything. I needn't have bothered, for after presenting me to the visitors, Enoch and Vi, my parents ignored me, as if I had become part of the furniture. It was their customary attitude, and it suited me.

"I don't see why we should restrict immigration," said my mother, picking up the threads of the conversation. "We've plenty for everyone here."

"We won't have plenty forever—not if we're overrun. We could wind up like Gleya," said Vi. She was a small, bald woman in body paint. Her nakedness repelled me.

"What's Gleya?" asked Enoch. He had a high, piping voice which was at odds with his powerful frame.

Vi gave him a look of contempt. "What do you care? If it's not fun to eat, and they don't use it in holodreams, you don't know about it. You never question, you never try. You might as well be a teddy, if you weren't bone-idle."

She was whipping herself into a fury, which my father interrupted. "What does the history of some second-rate planet have to do with us?"

"At least you know Gleya is a planet, which is more—"

"I learned all that at school. I studied colonial history. What does it matter? I just happen to have a good memory for even very boring, useless facts."

"Facts," said Vi, almost spitting the word. "Is that what you learned at school? I don't think so. Schools aren't about knowledge. They're assessment centers and training camps, to ensure society gets the best use out of each individual."

"What's wrong with that?" asked my mother.

"Nothing . . . if you happen to be one of the lucky ones. If it means you get opportunities to grow, and to enjoy the good life you're so fond of. But what about the others? What about the misfits, who have to suffer and work so that we can be comfortable? Don't you realize what your good life means? That our whole society is founded on slavery?"

"Vi, what have you been eating?" said my mother. "There's no slavery on Ederra—there never has been!"

"She's talking about the teddies," said my father wearily.

My attention was caught, although I continued to munch my cake. The teddies—my passion. What had Vi said?

"Yes," said Vi. "The teddies. Our slaves. If they're not an exploited class, I don't know what is."

"Oh, honestly," said my mother. "You can't talk about the teddies like that! They're not people, you know. And they don't *have* to work for us—we don't make them do it—they help us out of love. Everyone knows that!"

I nodded, for this was one lesson I had absorbed during my earliest years of schooling. The settling of Ederra had been a far cry from the bloody battles fought on some worlds. The Ederrans had welcomed us, and befriended us from the first, and annually Friendship Day celebrated the continuing peaceful, almost symbiotic, relationship between the two races.

"And look at all we give them," my mother went on. "All the benefits of civilization! They choose to build their towns on the edges of our cities—they could always go off and live in the wilderness, but they like to be near us. They love us, and we make them happy."

"Happiness isn't the issue. And happiness isn't enough. It is possible to be happy and still be enslaved."

"So what are you saying? That because we know better than the Ederrans that we shouldn't allow them to work for us? That we should drive them away, make them live by themselves in the wilderness, or keep

them on reservations? Maybe we should never have come here, but we can't go back now. For better or worse we're a part of the teddies' lives, and they are a part of ours. How can you call that slavery? We haven't made them what they are—it's in their nature to love us."

For a moment Vi looked uncertain. "Well," she said. "I didn't mean—but actually—"

"Vi means the other kind," said Enoch. "Not the *real* teddies—the others."

"What?" I said. I couldn't help myself, but I should have kept quiet. For now they had noticed me, and they were frowning.

"Back to your room," said my father. "That isn't for you. Go do your homework, or holodream or something. Go on, now."

I had not been punished for years but I found it impossible to disobey my father. Once out of the room, although my heart pounded unpleasantly with guilt, I lingered and strained my ears for more. I had to know what this mysterious "other kind" of Ederran might be.

I heard my mother say, defensively, "If he does, it will be his choice, and it will make him happy. You can't call that slavery."

"I can and I do. Happiness has nothing to do with it. If it really *was* his choice—but he's been subtly programmed for it all along. You know that. Ever since his early tests showed that he wasn't likely to qualify—"

"But that's just it! The tests didn't make him—they just showed that he didn't fit in. And he's miserable because he doesn't fit in. Why should he have to be unhappy all his life? Why shouldn't he have a choice? It's not something *we* would want for ourselves, but we shouldn't deny it to those who do. It *does* make them happy—there have been all sorts of tests. It's the best thing for them. I've read all the literature—"

I felt myself blushing. I knew, although I didn't understand exactly what she meant, that my mother was talking about me. I crept away to my room, feeling clumsy and unwanted, and wishing with all my heart that I could find, before I died, a place where I belonged.

Every Edderan city has its Teddytown, that pathetic cluster of mud huts and wooden shanties clinging to the skirts of the greater human city. I set out for ours one afternoon in the season of sun, and rode the rails to the farthest station on the Eastern line.

For me, for everyone, the descent into Teddytown is a potent, mythic experience. Others before me have turned it into the stuff of art, or at least sustaining entertainment, but I will not even try. My emotions and thoughts were real, but they would sound cliched if I tried to set them down. There's nothing special about me, and I have no creative or artistic talents: the tests given to me regularly throughout my school days showed that with a depressing, undeniable thoroughness. But I must tell you the bare facts. For me they glow in memory with a magical radiance, and perhaps, from your own experience, you can clothe them with a certain conviction, at least.

I had never before ventured so far from home. This part of Keemah, near the outskirts, was utterly strange to me. People didn't live here; the massive stone buildings around me—shining faintly pink in the reflected glow of the setting sun—were factories and warehouses, not designed for beauty but for utility. Only factory owners and inspectors would occasionally visit this clean yet desolate part of the great city.

Just as I was beginning to feel rather frightened by the emptiness and silence of the streets, there was the sound as of a great wheel turning, and openings appeared in the sides of the large, featureless buildings. A crowd of Ederrans, voiceless and slow, emerged. Of course: the workers were going home.

I fell in among them as they walked towards Teddytown, my skin prickling and nerves tingling at their presence. I was clumsy, drunk with their nearness. Whenever I bumped into one a shock of joy, nearly potent as an orgasm, passed through me. I had worried about finding my way, but now, a part of the large, moving crowd, I did not even pause to notice where we went, but let them carry me along. Homeward bound.

They showed no interest in me, but no distaste, either. They neither welcomed me nor drove me away. Whenever I cast a glance at one I found the kindly animal face looking straight ahead, a part of the herd, serene and unaware. Gradually their indifference lulled me into peace. I didn't mind the long walk, or worry about what would happen when I arrived. I felt I could go on walking forever, effortlessly, at one with the crowd.

And then we were in Teddytown. It was cleaner that I had expected, but every bit as crudely built and crowded as its depictions. Hovels—some rounded mud domes, others narrow wooden boxes—were crammed together without obvious planning on either side of narrow, unpaved lanes. I wondered if this was an Ederran attempt to imitate human architecture, or if they had lived in such warrens even before we came to their planet. No attempt had been at decoration, and everything was mud-colored.

But if there was no beauty, neither was there squalor. There was no garbage on the twisting, slightly muddy streets, and I saw no signs of untidiness as I wandered through the maze. The simplicity of it all appealed to me.

What struck me most was the silence. Although Keemah seemed to buzz in the distance, humming just on the edge of my consciousness, Teddytown was still and calm. The Ederrans had no vehicles and few machines. They could have had any of the benefits of civilizations we humans had brought with us, but—as far as I could tell—they had accepted only our plumbing and pollution-free methods of heating and lighting their homes. They had no interest in holodreaming. Although not deaf they disliked unnecessary noise.

Teddies, born without vocal chords, could not speak. They possessed no language of their own, but had learned a few simple gestures for the benefit of the human settlers, and seemed to understand, in a limited way, human speech. They did not feel trapped or limited by their silence,

and now I felt slightly ashamed, as the descendant of a noisy, conquering race. I fought the urge to clear my throat, and tried to breathe more quietly.

I was a spy moving through alien streets, watching the natives at their leisure. Guilty and aroused, I glanced in doorways and peered through windows, seeing them embrace, prepare food, or stroll through the streets. Some puffed on pipes, some snoozed against doorsteps, some swept the streets with enormous, crudely-made brooms. My heart caught in my throat at the perfection of it all and my own loneliness swelled within me.

They did not make me feel an intruder; none stared or seemed disturbed by my presence, none drew back or barred my way. I was as free as they all were, free even to come and go in their tiny houses. The gentle, undemanding gaze of an animal met my eyes when I looked through a round window. Through another doorway I caught sight of two figures entwined on a floor mat—one figure furred, the other as repellently naked as I was myself. I hurried away from that house, my heart like a knife in my chest, and tried to lose myself, to forget.

Gradually the silence of that primitive place wrapped itself about me and I felt the knots of my soul loosen and let go, one by one. There were no rules here, no expectations, no lessons to be learned. For a little while I could pretend that I belonged.

The smell of cooking tickled my nose and I realized I was hungry. From several chimneys drifted warm aromas: baking bread, stewing meats and vegetables, something malty and rich. I walked through an open door and found three Ederrans sitting on the floor with bowls of a succulent-smelling soup before them. I pointed to my mouth and then to my stomach, and one of them rose and ladled out another bowl for me. They watched benignly, waiting until I sat down awkwardly on the floor and took a cautious sip. At that moment I became one of them, and they turned their attention back to their food. A new feeling of warmth and comfort spread through me with the hot soup as we ate companionably together.

When I had mopped up the last bit of rich, tasty soup with a morsel of brown bread, I remained seated, watching as the teddies washed the dishes and cleaned up around me. One of them lit a pipe and offered me a puff, and we sat together on the doorstep, passing the pipe back and forth, watching the light fade from the sky.

With the fall of night, I felt I must leave. I spoke no word of thanks, for words in that place were wrong as well as unnecessary. I smiled at them, and all three of my new friends touched me before I went. From those brief caresses I knew they had accepted me. As simply and completely as that.

Only afterwards did I realize I had not accomplished what I had come for: I was still a virgin.

And yet it didn't matter. I knew that now. Something far stronger and

more important than a merely sexual need had called me to Teddytown. I had found a place where I belonged.

It became my habit to visit Teddytown every evening. My parents did not question me—I think they were relieved I had at last started to have a life of my own. Going out was an improvement over my former habit of sprawling in a stupor, surrounded by holographic images.

By the end of the first week I could detect differences among the Ederrans. They were no longer a homogenous mass to my human eyes. I could tell males from females at a glance, but learning to recognize individuals was more difficult. I was determined not to give in to human habit and nickname them: if Ederrans did not need names among themselves, neither did I.

I usually took supper with the three Ederrans I had met on my first visit, frequently bringing gifts of food so as not to be a burden. I did not know what their relationship was, why they lived three together in one tiny house, but I found myself thinking of them as a family: father, mother and daughter.

One evening in the third week since my first visit, our usual ritual altered. After we finished the meal the "parents" went out, closing the door behind them. The younger female and I were alone together in the little round room.

My heart began to pound and I scarcely breathed as she moved closer to me and began to stroke my arm. I needed no words to know that this was more than a friendly gesture: I took her in my arms and learned the meaning of love.

I use that word intentionally. It was what I felt. And nothing that has happened since, nothing I have learned, can diminish what happened to me then, with my first lover.

She became a habit, too, my warm, furry lover: like the long walk to Teddytown, the evening meal, the pipe I shared on the doorstep.

One night I stayed until morning. When I went home my parents did not ask me where I had been, but there was a feeling of celebration in the air, despite my sullen, defensive silence. I was growing up, and they were pleased.

It was my last season at school. I had reached the age when young people generally left their families to set up their own homes, to embark on their own careers. I had no plans for my life, however: I was qualified for no work and had no interest in further education. I only wanted to be allowed to go on as I had been, but that, of course, was impossible.

I dreamed of moving to Teddytown, but that was only a dream. Humans were not allowed to buy or lease the land which was provided free to the natives, and zoning restrictions ensured that I could not move my newfound Ederran family into the city with me.

I would have to work. The allowance my parents gave me would stop as soon as I left school, and if I could not find work for myself the city would assign me to something in exchange for room and board. But I did

not want to be provided for: I wanted to make my own life, find my own happiness. I went on avoiding the day of decision.

One morning like many other mornings I woke in the warm, round hut in Teddytown and didn't want to leave. I could hear the others stirring, but I held my lover close and refused to let her rise even after the other two had left for work. She did not struggle; once she understood what I wanted, she relaxed and did as I wished. I had sometimes wondered just how far an Ederran would have to be pushed before fighting back. They seemed to possess no wish or will of their own. It was as if they existed merely to reflect and fulfill the desires of the human beings around them. It made the question of how they had lived before the coming of the humans that much more puzzling.

But although such questions occurred to me, they did not obsess me. I wondered briefly and then forgot, more interested, really, in my own reactions.

As I made love that morning to my acquiescent teddy I was absorbed in sensation, not thought. I had never before lain with her in daylight; never before had I seen her so clearly and so close. As I lifted one soft, floppy ear, stroking it tenderly, I saw a thin line of scar, and the breath stopped in my throat.

She felt the change in me and looked up. In that moment I saw in her eyes an awareness and intelligence that I had never before seen; which I had never even imagined might exist.

The next moment she had turned her face away and was nibbling gently but demandingly at my neck. But it was too late for that; far too late. I had gone utterly cold. I pushed her away, down flat on her back, and bent over her. She tried, desperately, to distract me with love-play, but I put a sharp halt to that. And so she submitted. She lay still and let me examine her. What else could a teddy do?

Now that I looked, the signs were everywhere. How had I missed the unmistakable humanity behind the fur and the outward pretense? I parted the silky hair at her throat and saw the most damning evidence of all: the scar tissue left by the operation which had removed her vocal chords. I left her there, lying in her human tears.

I was furious. I felt I had been cheated, tricked and made a fool of. To have believed myself in love with one who was nothing more than a mockery, a former human misfit, was a blow to my always shaky self-esteem. If I could be so easily misled, how could I expect to recognize true happiness—and what made me think I deserved it?

A whole week I stayed away from Teddytown, and the pressures built up intolerably. My parents urged me to get a job, to move out, to make a life for myself. What I did was not important, they said, but I must do *something*. I was an adult now, and I must choose.

It seemed so obvious when I finally decided. I had been happy among the Ederrans as I had never been with my own people. I wanted to live in Teddytown. For a human being, thisw as not possible, but I could have myself changed. I would become a teddy.

I thought this was a brave and original decision, not realizing that my whole, miserable life had been a journey to that end. The choice had been made for me at some time back in my childhood, when I had snuggled against the warm, furry body of my teddy. Really, there was nothing else I *could* do.

But it took me some time to work up the courage to go to a transformation clinic. I expected scorn or distaste; I thought psychiatrists would be enlisted to try to change my mind. But everyone I spoke to seemed sympathetic. They found my desire understandable, not odd. Even my parents seemed almost relieved—at last I was doing *something*—and took my momentous news very calmly.

I had to undergo a great many tests, of course: guided dreaming, hypnoregression, and hours of interviews with counselors trained to spot any hidden neuroses or uncertainties. No one ever tried to discourage me, and all the tests and discussions served to reinforce my conviction. For the first time in my life, I began to believe that I was normal. I'd felt like a misfit for so long because I'd been trying to be something that I was not. Now I knew the truth about myself: I was a teddy who'd had the misfortune to be born inside a human skin.

The preliminaries went smoothly, and soon I was pronounced ready for the sequence of operations and treatments which would eventually transform me into what I knew myself to be.

There was only one catch: the cost. Despite the team of psychologists who declared me unfit to live a full and happy life in my present physical form, the course of treatment necessary to turn me into an Ederran was considered "cosmetic surgery," and, as such, it was very costly.

But other poor souls had gone before me, and there was a system. I had only to sign a contract, an agreement to work for the city for a given number of years, and I could embark on the course of treatment immediately. My job would be unskilled labor, working in a factory with other Ederrans. Nothing could have pleased me more. Even if money had been no problem I would have wanted to work among the Ederrans. I wanted no special privileges. I wanted to be one of them, to forget that there had ever been any other sort of life open to me.

The transformation from human to Ederran would be slow. It was carefully staged to allow the individual time for adjustment, and until the final operation severed my vocal chords, I was told I could turn back at any point. But I could not imagine changing my mind. Already I felt an imposter in a human body.

I moved into a government housing block and started my new job. The factory where I worked was filled with Ederrans, of course, but there were others like myself, in various stages of transformation. These I shunned. They were repellent to me, reminding me of myself, and how I must appear to others.

In the evenings I went back to Teddytown where I took my meals and found new lovers. I had everything I had always wanted, and I should have been happy.

We made love in darkness, always, but late at night, when I should have slept contentedly in a warm embrace, my fingers would creep as if of their own accord to trace the tell-tale scars beneath the thick fur. Under the fur I felt the human bones, just as I could now see human features, human customs and manners, hidden and distorted by pretence. But still, and always, there.

It became a desperate, obsessive search. Every night a new lover—and every one was like me. A freak, a misfit, an imposter.

Where were the real Ederrans? Were they avoiding me? Was I still too human for their liking? Or had the transformed humans, over the years, taken over this Teddytown, driving the true-born teddies somewhere else?

Perhaps they lived in the wild, scorning cities. I had never heard of such a thing, but perhaps the truth was kept hidden from such as me. I did not know who to ask, nor how to find out.

The soft, golden fur grew all over my body, and day by day I took on more of the semblance of an Ederran. But I knew my appearance was a lie, and it tortured me. Outwardly I was changing, but not inwardly. I was still myself, still a misfit. I did not know how else to be, how to change myself from within. For that I would need a model—a true Ederran, not the fakes and freaks around me.

Hating myself, and stumbling uncertainly (for teddies do not question), I tried to ask one of the counselors at the clinic. Had I been sent to live among false teddies as some sort of test? When would I be allowed to meet the real ones?

She seemed surprised. She said she had never noticed any differences among the Ederrans—oh, she could tell male from female, and recognized a few, but basically they all looked alike to her.

When I insisted, and she could see how miserable I was, she told me that I must stop questioning, stop looking for differences. I would never be happy, and never be an Ederran, until I believed I was. Then she scheduled me for some special counseling sessions.

These sessions left me more confused than before. Instead of answering my questions, the new counselors told me that my curiosity was a human trait which I must eliminate if I wanted to become an Ederran. I was offered drugs and hypnotherapy which they said would cure my curiosity by making me forget. They could make me believe that I had never been human. As well as a new future, they could create a whole new past for me. They could make me happy if only I would let them.

Happiness isn't the issue. And happiness isn't enough. I remembered hearing that without understanding. And now I felt it. I wanted something more, something other than happiness. I wanted truth.

At school they had taught us that answers could be found in libraries. But I also learned at school how difficult it was for me to find those answers. Now, as a teddy, I knew my mind would go as blank as the blinking green screen on the terminal when I tried to formulate my question.

Casting about in my mind for someone who might help me I recalled that friend of my parents, the woman named Vi. She had spoken about the Ederrans—and about slavery, and happiness—and I'd had the feeling that she knew something most people, including my parents, did not. I had seen her once or twice while holodreaming, zooming past her lecturing face—she was some sort of public scholar, an authority on something. If *she* couldn't tell me, perhaps no one could.

Vi answered her door and looked at me in a way I had come to expect from most human beings—with pity, but not, I was relieved to note, disgust. She did not recognize me, but when I introduced myself she looked a little shocked. She recovered quickly, however, and invited me in, asking about my parents.

"I don't see them much," I said. "They don't know how to act towards me now."

"Yes," said Vi. "I can well imagine. . . . What brings you here?"

Her voice was sharp and cold. In my nervousness, I found it hard to speak. "Teddies," I said. "Them, the Ederrans. I want to know. About them."

She looked me up and down. "You must know a lot more than I. Living among them. Becoming one of them."

I shook my head. "No. The ones I've met are all like me. Changed, not born. They're only pretending. I can't find any *real* Ederrans."

"What, not in all of Teddytown?"

"No." I touched my neck, where the incision would one day be made, and traced a line. "They all have the scar. Every one I've met. I've been looking, believe me." I had the feeling that she already knew what I was telling her, that she'd heard it before, perhaps discovered it herself.

"Look, just forget about it," she said. "What does it matter if you can't find them? You're getting what you wanted, aren't you?"

"It's important," I said. "See, I don't want my body—not *just* my body—changed. *I* have to change, too, inside. And I don't know how, I don't know how to be a real Ederran. If I could find them, they could teach me."

She sighed, and held herself as if she were cold. "You are what you are," she said softly. "Nobody else can change you."

I had the impression she was talking to herself. "Just tell me where they are," I said. "Tell me what happened."

"You don't want to know," she said, and I began to shake.

She saw my terror but offered no comfort. "You know," she said. "You've felt it, haven't you? No one has to tell you. You've felt it."

"No."

Then she was pushing me towards the door. "Forget about it," she said. "Go away, be what you want to be. Don't question. Believe what they tell you at the clinic. You were miserable, but now you've got a chance for happiness. The truth doesn't matter."

"It does," I said. I stood firm, not letting her push me.

She looked up into my ugly, half-and-half face. "If you mean that, why do you want to change yourself? Why do you want to live a lie?"

"I wanted to be happy."

She sighed, and the tension went out of her body. I knew then that she would tell me what I wanted to know, and I began to wish I'd never asked.

"There's no happiness in finding out," she said. "Believe me."

"Happiness isn't enough," I said.

"That sounds like me talking. Teddies don't ask questions."

"I'm not a teddy. I'm not anything. Tell me."

"How you knew to come to me," she said wonderingly. "I've one life already on my conscience. I thought I could cure him with truth, but it was a poison. That's why they make it so hard to find out. Dangerous drug, truth. You know they can make you forget, at the clinic? If I tell you something you can't bear to know, they can take it away again. All you have to do is ask. They can give you happiness. They won't force it on you." She sneered. "That's their out. All your life they push you in one direction, but then at the last they hold back. They pretend it was your choice all along. Your decision, they say. Free will. To be or not to be . . . as if choosing your chains made you less a slave!"

"I don't care about that—I'll *be* a slave, if I can only find them. If they'll have me."

"Who?"

"The Ederrans."

"They're everywhere! Look around you." She smirked unhappily. "We're all Ederrans. There are more today than ever before."

"Not your kind . . . not my kind of—I mean, the *real* teddies. The first ones. Those who were here when the human colonists came."

"They're dead."

I started to protest, thinking she was playing with me, but the expression on her face stopped me. "Oh, yes," she said. "All of them. Not just dead. Extinct. The whole race. For years and years now. Would you like to sit down? Can I get you a trank?"

I didn't move. I didn't even feel surprised.

She rushed on, as if glad to get it out. "It's true. Believe it or not. *Don't* believe it. I shouldn't have told you. It's not the official story; it's not what they say to schoolchildren; it's not what people want to believe. But it is the historical truth. People try, people change their memories, but they can't really change the past. It happened, and it leaves a deposit to be found—if you look hard enough, if you search the original records the way I did. The native Ederran population had completely died out by the end of our first century here."

"How? Why?"

She shrugged. "They couldn't tell us, and our scientists couldn't figure it out. They seemed to lose the will to live. There were plagues, and then they stopped reproducing. They simply died, one by one, of various causes.

It was never a large population. Perhaps that sort of thing simply happens to species all the time. Maybe we triggered it—a lot of the first colonists felt it was their fault, that if they didn't carry some actual, deadly virus, that the human presence was in itself a virus. That the Ederrans on some level decided to commit suicide rather than try to compete or coexist with us."

"But why—why are there so many—?"

"I had this theory for awhile—this paranoid, crazy theory—that it was a plot. Some computer's idea of the perfect society, with lots of content, cuddly slaves serving the upper class. Our society does benefit from it, there's no doubt of that. And it's perpetuated because it is so useful to have a cheap, uncomplaining labor force. It also cuts down on crime, and the birth rate. So we make it easier for people to stop being people. We weed out the misfits at an early age, and suggest to them that they're not good enough to make it as human beings . . . but that's all right, they don't have to struggle or feel unhappy, because there's a place for them, too. If you don't fit in with the humans, the Ederrans will take you. Don't change the world, change your body.

"The teddies live on, not only in holodreams, but in our hearts. In people like you." Briefly she touched her hand to my furry chest.

"It's not a plot," she continued. "I wanted to believe it was, that there was someone besides myself to blame when my son—But I'm too good a scholar. I can't settle for fantasy, no matter how satisfying it seems.

"We say the Ederrans need us, but of course they didn't. They died of us. It's we who need them. Not just economically, not physically, as servants, but psychologically. Emotionally. I don't know why, but we were unable to let them die. Since we couldn't save them one way, we had to resurrect them, even if it was with our own bodies. As far as I can tell from the records, the first humans to go native did so in a spirit of atonement. They felt responsible for Ederran deaths, and this was their way of working out their guilt, and doing something positive to keep the native culture alive.

"Or maybe they were fooling themselves. Maybe they, like the Ederrans they imitated, were trying to commit racial suicide. It might be a form of death wish. I don't know what drove them to it. I don't know what makes you hate yourself so much, what makes you believe that you're not really human. Sometimes I think people like you are far more alien than the original Ederrans."

"Why?" I asked, meaning now: Why me?

Vi's voice was gentler when she replied, and I knew that she was going to offer me an antidote to her truth, whether a more palatable version, or a kindly fib.

"Some people—scholars, psychologists, philosophers—have suggested there's another answer. Not guilt, not self-hatred, not cultural conditioning. Their answer lies with the Ederrans. They say that perhaps the Ederrans, although they perished physically, are still among us. Their

souls survived death to be reborn into human bodies. We are the new Ederrans in more than one sense. We haven't simply replaced them, but have incorporated them within ourselves. And for some of us, the Ederran soul is too strong, too self-aware to be absorbed. It can't adjust to humanity because it still remembers the old ways, and longs for them. It's not comfortable in a human body, and struggles to recreate the vanished self.

"A lot of people believe that. It might help you."

But she did not believe it, and neither could I. I'd gone beyond the fantasies that had sustained me throughout my childhood. The truth stuck in my throat, and I couldn't swallow anything else.

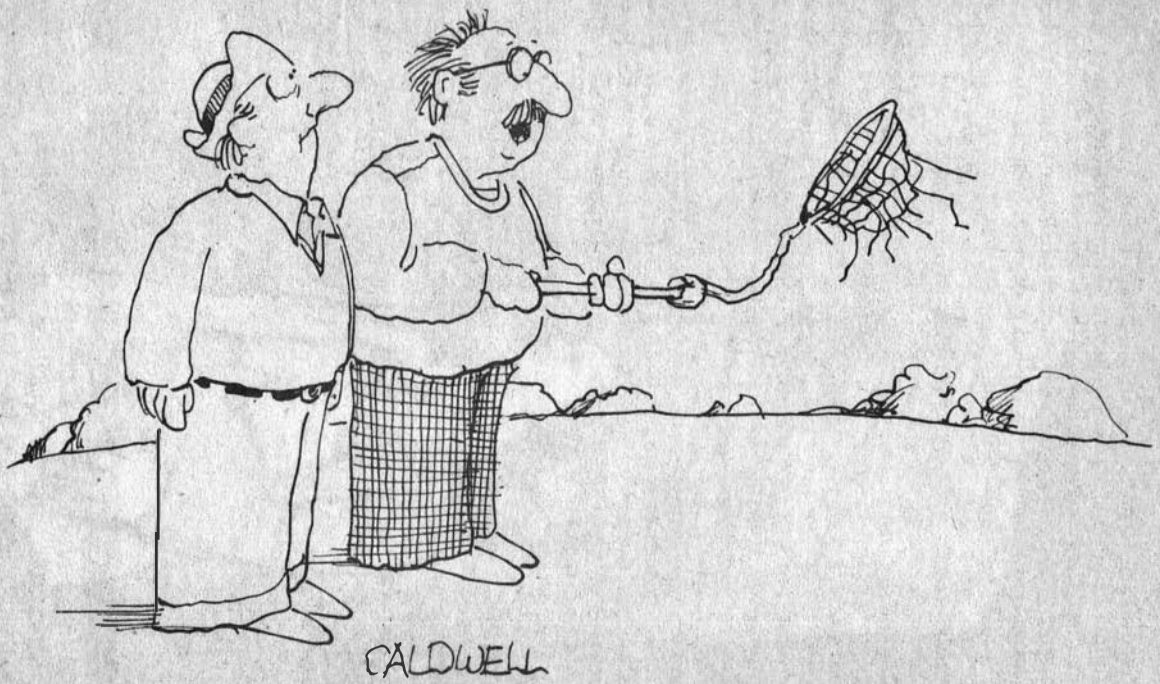
Yet I went back to the clinic. I went back to my factory job, and back to Teddytown. What else could I do? Where else did I belong? I am a misfit, and I know it. I refused the drugs and the enforced forgetting—it was a point of pride. Not so much to remember what I was, but always to know what I was not.

I was what I had been made to be.

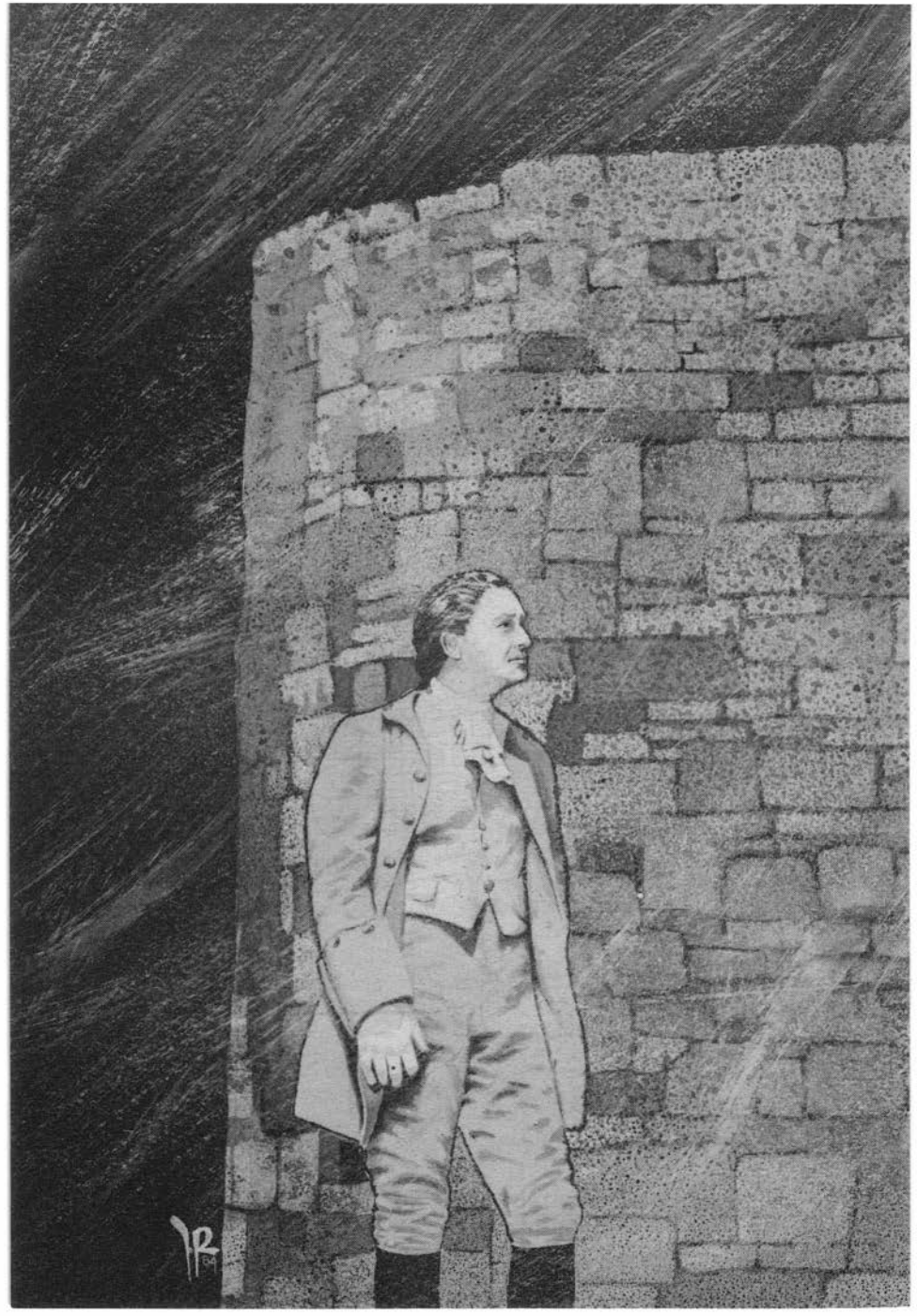
They made me: the psychologists, my parents, teachers, society. They told me I was a failure as a human being, as if humanity was a game I had never mastered. I had believed them. But now I could see that life as an Ederran was just another game—a simpler game, more easily mastered, but no better for that.

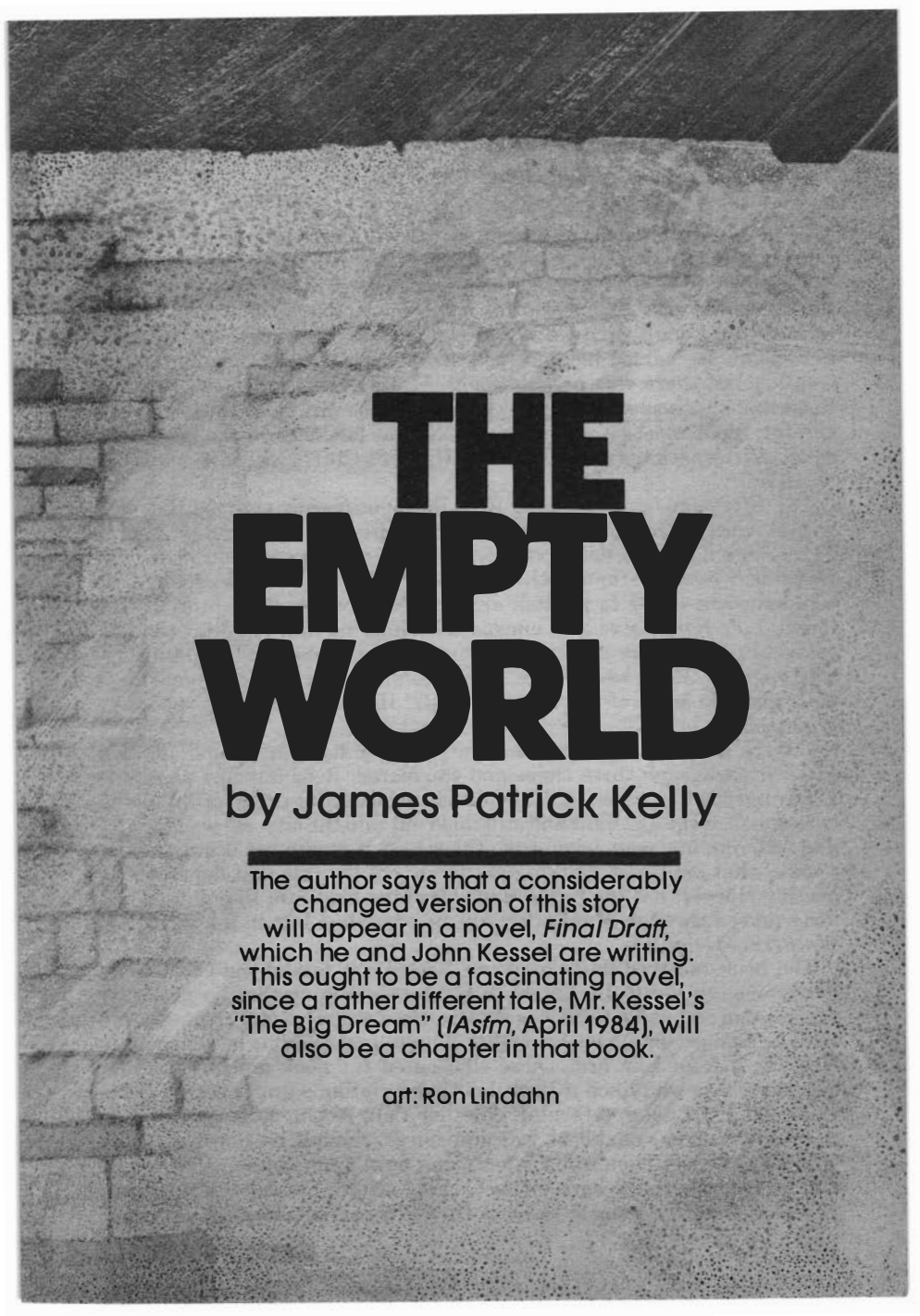
Somehow, I go on playing. And wishing I could still believe. But wherever I look I see human suffering, human eyes peering sadly through furry masks. Where once I saw peace I now see self-deception. In the calm silence I now hear tension, and a forced forgetting. I wonder how many of them know what I know, but I can never ask.

At night, in my dreams, I am happy and at home in a furry animal body, knowing myself safe among my own kind. And then they look at me, and remove their masks, and I see their furless human faces grinning and mocking me. I wake up crying human tears, realizing again that I am a stranger here, and alone. ●



"That was not your ordinary run-of-the-mill monarch butterfly, Leo."





THE EMPTY WORLD

by James Patrick Kelly

The author says that a considerably changed version of this story will appear in a novel, *Final Draft*, which he and John Kessel are writing. This ought to be a fascinating novel, since a rather different tale, Mr. Kessel's "The Big Dream" (*IAsfm*, April 1984), will also be a chapter in that book.

art: Ron Lindahn

"Once drinking deep of that divinest anguish,
How could I seek the empty world again?"

—Emily Brontë

I

In the winter of 1848 the packet boat *S.S. Europe* docked in New York carrying early proofs of a book set to be published by Thomas Newby of London. There to meet it was Fitzpatrick Reed, a literary assistant with the American publishers, Harper & Brothers. Reed was a tall, sandy-haired young man with watery brown eyes and the complexion of old newsprint. He cursed his bad luck at having to suffer the abominable weather but there was no help for it. Wesley Harper himself had told Reed that this was a book that would surely be pirated if they were not careful. Ignoring several flinty-eyed ruffians loitering on the pier, Reed collected the package and returned to Harper's Cliff Street offices without incident.

The title page bore the name Ellis Bell, but Newby claimed that this was in reality none other than Currer Bell, the celebrated author of *Jane Eyre*. *Jane Eyre* was doing very well for Harpers, particularly in New England where the moral climate was as fierce as a nor'easter. The company was eager to publish more of Bell's work. Reed himself had found *Jane Eyre* naive and uneven, although he had to admit that occasionally characters came into brilliant focus, illuminated by lightning-like emotion. Reed wedged his long legs under his tiny desk and bent over the first page of the new book. Mr. Harper expected a report by Wednesday.

Twelve hours later, long after everyone else had gone home, he read the last paragraph three times and shuddered. Reed felt like a prophet returning from a vision of Jehovah. He stacked the pages of the proof, extinguished the gas light and stumbled out into the city. He was hungry and stiff and his head ached from the strain of reading in dim light but none of that mattered. Nothing mattered: not the cold, not his report to Wesley Harper, not the pedestrians brushing past him like ghosts. His body moved through Manhattan but he remained lost in á book called *Wuthering Heights*.

The book received harsh reviews; Bostonians talked the Old Corner Bookstore into returning copies to Harpers, claiming that its profanity was beyond enduring. Reed was not surprised at the reaction from Beacon Hill; he had grown up on Louisburg Square and had but lately come to New York from Harvard. Those who hated the book proclaimed their outrage; those who liked it kept their appreciation a guilty secret. Sales were steady, if not spectacular. Another Bell, Acton, soon appeared on the scene. Currer's next book was uninspired. From Ellis, however, there was only silence. Then came astonishing news from London. The coarse and passionate Bells were, in fact, three sisters named Brontë, three *spinsters* from the remote town of Haworth in Yorkshire whose tragic

lives seemed to have imitated their art. There would be no more books from Ellis Bell; Emily Brontë had died of consumption at the age of thirty.

Reed was one of those who kept their obsession with her book a secret. Nonetheless, it had infected his imagination. Its grand and cruel passions made his own existence seem pallid, a cheapjack parody of life. His work suffered; each new book that Harpers published seemed an indictment. While other great souls built a new nation, made spectacular voyages of discovery, probed their hearts and the universe for meaning, he, Fitzpatrick Reed, sat at a desk that was too small for him and corrected proof. He wanted desperately to fall in love—not with any of the callow women of his acquaintance—but with someone dangerous. Someone who could ignite in his smouldering spirit an all-consuming conflagration. Someone like Emily Brontë. He daydreamed that she had been describing herself when she had called her heroine Catherine "an unearthly beauty" with eyes that "appeared always to gaze beyond, and far beyond—you would have said out of this world." If only he could have met her!

Three desultory years passed and then a fire did change Reed's life. It was not, however, a blaze of passion. A pan of camphine, used for cleaning printing plates, accidentally ignited and flames quickly engulfed the Harpers' complex. The fire provided Reed with an excuse to indulge his restlessness. Since the company was looking for ways to cut costs during the rebuilding, Reed volunteered to go to work for Harpers' London agent and study British publishing. So it was that he arrived in London in 1855, just in time to hear the sad news that Charlotte, the last of the Brontës, had suffered the same terrible fate as her sisters and had died of consumption. He grieved with the rest of literary London at this latest tragedy and vowed that at the first opportunity he would make a pilgrimage to the graves of Charlotte and Emily in Haworth churchyard.

II

Reed awoke in a drift of snow. Huge flakes dropped from the twilit sky like spiders on invisible webs. He sat up and shook himself. His head was pounding; when he touched his brow his fingers came away bloody. He had no idea where he was but he knew that if he did not move soon the storm would bury him.

He brushed the snow from his clothing. He was wearing a blue frock coat over a waistcoat of gray wool. His knee breeches were tucked into polished black boots. Reed might have been appropriately dressed for tea in a country parlor but was woefully underdressed for winter, lacking greatcoat, hat and gloves. He stood and waded to what seemed to be a road. The snow was already ankle-deep and was rapidly filling a track left by hooves and carriage wheels. There were footprints as well but they were too blurred by the storm to tell much of a story. He assumed

that he had met some sort of misadventure. A robbery, perhaps, or an accident; he could not remember. He was Fitzpatrick Reed of New York; the last thing he remembered was boarding a train in London on a holiday to Haworth. Beyond that his memory was as blank as the white-washed landscape around him. He set out to find shelter from night and the storm.

He was shivering and near despair when he saw the light. On a knoll well back from the road sprawled the shadow of a great house. All the windows but one were dark, but that single beacon promised Reed's salvation. He left the road and climbed toward it.

The immediate grounds of the house were surrounded by a forbidding stone wall, eight feet high. Reed followed along the outside, searching for a gate. The drifts were already up to the top of his boots. His spirits flagged once again; he could no longer see the light or anything but dark rock and gray snow. He cursed the builder for a fool who had constructed a wall fit for a Norman castellan, not a country squire. As he slogged onward the cold dulled all thought.

He came to himself with a start when he saw footprints in *front* of him. He had gone completely around the wall. Reed could not imagine how he could have missed the gate. He was too weary to make another circuit. He decided he must scale the wall. The inhabitants of the house would surely understand his desperation.

With numb fingers he grasped the stone and scrambled up and over like a thief.

Although there was no light on this side of the house he could make out a few details. It stood three stories tall and was built of granite blocks, with some lighter stone used for quoining and coping. Clearly the owner was a gentleman of substance. Reed picked his way through an espalier garden and peered through one of the arched windows. The glass was filthy. He thought he could see a few white shapes in the room, suggesting furniture covered with sheets against the dust, but it was too dark to be sure.

He walked around to the front portico with its imposing eight panel door. The knocker was unusual, a huge brass pen which struck against a plate in the shape of an open book. He knocked and waited, stamping his boots to keep the blood circulating. Reed's theory was that this was the country seat of a declining peer, or of some financially-embarrassed London merchant. He did not expect to be greeted by the owner—a caretaker was more likely. He knocked again. His toes ached: he was worried about frostbite. Was the poor wretch deaf? Reed was perishing from the cold. With a curse he decided to walk around the house to the window where he had seen the light. At the edge of the portico, however, he was brought up short in astonishment. Even in the driving snow, the front walk was clearly outlined by two low boxwood hedges. He gazed through the storm in disbelief.

The walk ran to a dead end at the wall. There was no gate.

III

She was a small woman, as hard and as plain as a stone barn. She had the pale skin of an invalid. He guessed that she was in her early thirties. She was wearing a cheap, factory-made dress of mourning black and a gray hand-knitted shawl. A smile would have softened the grimness which seemed etched on her face but Reed suspected that this woman did not often indulge in smiling.

"Why have you come here?" She stood in the doorway of the servants' annex, blocking his entrance. "Who are you to disturb my peace?"

Reed was startled by her gruffness. He was without hat and coat and the snow was swirling around him. There was a clot of dried blood on his temple. "I beg your pardon, ma'am. I've had an accident and I was lost in the storm when I saw your light. I wondered if I might stay here until it passes—a chair by the hearth would suffice."

She frowned.

"Of course, I'm willing to pay for your hospitality."

"Come in if you must."

She lit his way with an oil lamp through the wooden annex which contained a wash-house, coal bin, pump, and empty pigeon-cote, arriving at last in the kitchen. A fire was dying in a brick hearth. Beside it lay a huge brown mastiff, a dog which certainly outweighed its mistress. It raised its head and growled at Reed. "Down, Keeper," she said. There was gray on its muzzle and its eyes were cloudy with age. It settled down immediately as she threw two small logs and a lump of coal onto the fire.

"Tea?"

"It would save my life. Please." A country spinster, he thought to himself. As suspicious as a mouse and with just about as much conversation in her.

She poured water from a pitcher into a cast-iron kettle which hung over the fire. "What kind of accident?"

Reed stood with his back to the hearth. "I'm not quite sure. I'm an American, newly arrived in your country. I work in London and I thought I might spend my first holiday traveling up-country. I must have gotten off the train but I can't really say why. All I can remember now is waking up in a drift of snow. I started walking and here I am."

"A holiday in Yorkshire? In the winter?"

Reed moved closer to the fire.

"The nearest station is ten miles away."

He shrugged. "I suppose there must have been a carriage at some point. . . ."

"You were on the train and suddenly you find yourself wandering across the moors miles from the nearest track. That is hardly a credible story, sir."

"No." Reed shook his head and smiled. "I'll try to think of a better one. By the way, my name is Fitzpatrick Reed." He waited for an introduction which did not come. "And whom do I have the pleasure of addressing?"

"You may call me what you will, Mr. Reed, for all the pleasure it gives you!" Her look was fierce, as if challenging him to pursue the subject. He said nothing. "You've a nasty cut on your head. It needs cleaning." She went out to the pump house.

He glanced about him. Cast iron cooking utensils hung from hooks on the wall beside the hearth. There was a round wooden table with six loop-back Windsor chairs. On the table was a portable rosewood desk which had on it three steel pen nibs, a quill nib, a silver pen holder, a bottle of ink and a sheaf of papers. He had interrupted her in the midst of writing. Love letters? He was not embarrassed to peek at the topmost sheet.

"So hopeless is the world without,
The world within I doubly prize;
Thy world where guile and hate and doubt
And cold suspicion never rise . . ."

He pulled one of the chairs over to the hearth and stretched his feet toward the fire. A country poet.

She returned with a washcloth and a bowl full of cold water which she set on Reed's lap. "Stay still now while I wash away the blood." She daubed at his forehead with the washcloth.

"Do you live here by yourself, ma'am?"

"There's a dog."

Reed smiled again; he was determined to find her truculence amusing. He imagined that she was testing him. "And the master of the house? Where is he?"

She gazed at him with disdain. "This is my house, sir."

"Yours?" It hurt when he raised his eyebrow. "I see. Well, it is an *interesting* old place. A bit odd, but you English seem to prefer things that way, if you don't mind my saying so. Do you know that I walked completely around your property without seeing the gate?"

"And yet here you are, Mr. Reed."

"I confess that I was forced to scale the wall. Then there is the matter of your front walk. It doesn't seem to go anywhere."

"I see no point in encouraging visitors." She rinsed the washcloth out and took the bowl away.

"Do you mean to say that there is no gate?"

"I shouldn't think you'll need to see a doctor, Mr. Reed. It's not a large wound and the bleeding has stopped." She brought tea in a delft cup.

"You amaze me, ma'am." He shivered. Even though he had escaped the storm, he seemed to be getting colder. Snow had melted on his coat and soaked through. The niggardly fire cast little heat. Even the tea was tepid. "Do you mind if I remove my coat? I'm afraid it's soaked."

"My advice would be to change out of those wet clothes immediately. You should retire. I'll show you to your room."

"You needn't bother. I'll be fine right here by the fire, thank you."

She put her papers into the rosewood desk and picked it up. "I do not

want a strange man sleeping in my kitchen or prowling about my house in the night, Mr. Reed. I must insist that you go now to your room and remain there until morning."

Reed felt sorry for her. He was sure that she did not realize how rude she was: the curse of a solitary life. "As you wish, ma'am."

She lit the way to a great stair hall which was so cold that he could see his breath. He paused to admire the wallpaper, decorated with grisaille views of English gentry strolling through Roman ruins.

"Why, this is magnificent!" There were picnics beside crumbling walls. Lazy shepherds watched their flocks. Well-dressed children played beside headless statues. "It must have been handpainted."

She nodded. "In the studio of M. Dufour, in Paris. This way please."

His second story room was large but sparsely furnished with a walnut highboy, an armchair with a threadbare seat, and a canopied bed. The wallpaper with its crossed goose quill pattern was waterstained; the heavy curtains smelled of mildew. There were three logs in the fireplace.

"You may start a fire to dry your clothing." His hostess lit the candles which stood on either end of the mantleshelf. "There's a feather comforter under the counterpane, you should be warm enough." She glanced around the room as if to assure herself that he had everything he needed. "This is an old house, Mr. Reed, and it's full of stories. The wind will fill the cracks tonight and the house m[a]y speak. Do not be alarmed. You'll be quite safe as long as you remain in the room. Good evening to you, sir." She bowed and closed the door behind her.

Reed chuckled. He had heard about the English and their ghosts. This dotty woman had a few things to learn about Americans if she thought that she could frighten him so easily. He used a candle to light the kindling in the fireplace. It blazed up quickly but, as with the kitchen fire, seemed to radiate little heat. Reed pulled off his coat and waistcoat and draped them over the chair in front of the fireplace. He did not scruple to search the highboy for a change of clothing. All the drawers were empty but one. In it were a set of twelve wooden soldiers and a remarkable collection of miniature books, each the size of a gold quarter-eagle piece. They were printed in what appeared to be a child's handwriting. The light was too poor and the lettering too small for Reed to be able to make out anything but the title pages. A number of them were copies of something called BRANWELL'S BLACKWOODS'S MAGAZINE. He picked up another:

YOUNG MEN'S
MAGAZINE NO.
THIRD
FOR OCTOBER 1830
Edited by Charlotte Brontë

Reed was stunned. His first thought was that he was the victim of some cruelly pointed hoax, but he had neither friends nor enemies in this country. He took a ragged breath and reached for another of the toy books. Someone started to batter at the door.

"Who's in there?" It was a drunkard's voice, thick and angry. "Open up at once!" The old door bucked on its hinges.

"I'm coming." Reed tried the knob but it turned uselessly in his hand. "I can't get it open," he called.

"Emily! Damn your eyes, Emily; where are you?" The man outside did not seem to have heard him. "Emily, there's someone in my room." He began to weep.

Reed peered through the keyhole but all he could see were shadows and the flickering of light. Presently he heard a light step and the voice of his hostess.

"Branwell, whatever are you doing?" Her whisper was harsh. "Thank God Father is not here to see you like this. You promised him! You promised all of us!"

"Hello!" called Reed. "Ma'am? The door seems to be stuck, ma'am."

Branwell's voice went from a mumble to a wail. "It's all over with me, Emily. I'm a failure; we're all failures. All the stories we told each other, the magical lives we would lead when we grew up. Lies, Emily. Lies all of them. We're nothing but a lot of Yorkshire bumpkins."

"Get up, Branwell. You're no brother of mine." Something scraped against the door. "Go back to your whiskey and your fashionable opium. You are a hopeless being and I will not have you in my house."

The man outside grunted. "You've found him then?" There came a single tap on the door. "Is this the lover you've been hoping for all these years?" It sounded like a taunt. Reed no longer tried to make his presence known. He eavesdropped in embarrassed silence.

"I'm not waiting for anyone, Branwell. I don't need anyone. My world is complete, I'm content to be alone in it. Now, would you please go?"

They passed from his door, still bickering. Reed strained to hear long after the voices had faded. Then he realized what he was doing and shivered. He was ashamed of his ungentlemanly behavior and yet he could not deny his intense interest in the argument. She had called the fellow Branwell. There were rumors of a Brontë brother named Branwell who had debauched himself into the grave. And he had called her . . . Emily. No, it was *unthinkable.* He tried the door again, and pulled the knob right out of its escutcheon. The knob felt like a lump of ice in his hand; there was no escape, nothing to do but wait out the night.

Reed was chilled; he returned to the fire. The incident had left him with a queasy feeling. He worried that he was having a delayed reaction to his head wound. He stripped the feather comforter from the bed, wrapped himself in it and stood by the fire, stamping his feet and blowing into his hands. Damn the woman anyway! He could not believe how cold the house was. He went to the window and parted the dusty curtains to see if it were still snowing.

"Dear God!" For a moment, Reed doubted his sanity. The window did not overlook snowcovered Yorkshire moors. The sky was clear and the reflection of a full moon shimmered in the waters of a harbor crowded

with ships. Gas-lights revealed busy streets filled with cabriolets and large phaetons and strolling pedestrians in summer dress. There were palm trees and hibiscus with blooms as big as tea saucers.

He rushed to the room's other window, tore back the curtains. He felt his legs going out from under him and sank to his knees. He peered over the sill, certain now that he had taken leave of his senses. Sunlight filtered dimly through the canopy of a wooded park. A stone footbridge crossed a muddy brook. Wildflowers poked through the deep layer of humus on the forest floor: violets and trilliums and jack-in-the-pulpits. Not six feet from the window, the leaf buds had burst along the branches of a gnarled ash.

He knelt there for several minutes, staring down at the park, willing it to vanish. A squirrel climbed down the ash and sat on a branch just outside the window, tail flicking. On an impulse Reed tried to raise the inner sash, but it was painted shut. He gave it a sharp blow with the heel of his hand and the squirrel leapt away. With a grunt Reed forced the window open.

"Hello! Is anyone there?" He could hear the brook gurgling, feel the sweet spring breeze. No one answered. "Ma'am? Miss Emily?" The hair on the back of Reed's neck prickled. He had to find out. He crawled onto the sill, stretched for the nearby branch and swung onto it.

He stooped at the foot of the ash and picked up a handful of dirt. It was cold and wet and it smelled like the mud pies he had made as a boy. He could no sooner doubt its reality than he could doubt his own. He stepped up to the house and touched the stone foundation. Flakes of gray-green lichen clung to it; a living patina that could only have grown over the course of decades.

Reed's instincts told him to climb back to his room, shut the window and pull the covers over his head, lest his reason be overthrown by the terrible impossibility of what he was witnessing. And yet he could not imagine himself cowering in his room like a child afraid of the dark. As a matter of spiritual pride he could not turn away from this madness; it was the danger he had longed for all of his dreary life. He knew he must probe it to its source. Cautiously he circled around the house.

On the southern side the ground pitched steeply away from the foundation. The windows above him were open but they were too high to see into the house. Reed paused, looking up. A woman was speaking in the room above him.

" . . . a trap. You receive no visitors; you never leave this house. Perhaps you deceive yourself that tomorrow you'll go back out into the world. But each day that you spend here makes it less likely that you will *ever* escape. You're burying yourself here."

"I'm content, Charlotte." He recognized his hostess's voice. "I cannot change what I am. The world has no claim on me. Would you have me lose my soul for the sake of pleasing fools?"

"It pains me to hear you talk like this. You have a great talent, Emily,

far greater than mine. Do not deny it. What of your poems, your novel? Do you call your readers fools?"

Emily chuckled bitterly. "I should never have let you talk me into publishing the poems. They were messages to myself. Two copies sold—two! And the novel was scarcely better received. I love you and Anne and Father and yes, even poor Branwell—but that is all. As long as I have you, and this place, I shall not complain."

Reed leapt up and curled fingers around the sill. He scratched for a foothold in the joints between the stone blocks.

"I love you too, Emily. You are my sister. I want to help you overcome this unnatural shyness."

"Would that it were only shyness!" At that moment Reed pulled himself up and gained a view of the room. "You should know me better than that! You must!"

He looked through red damask curtains into a parlor which, unlike the other room he had seen, showed every evidence of daily use. Three Chinese Chippendale chairs were arranged around a marble fireplace. The walls were hung with family portraits. There were two women in the room. One, a stranger, sat on a carved mahogany sofa facing the window. Could this be Charlotte Brontë? She was wearing an old-fashioned dress of a dark, rusty green fabric. She was smaller than her sister but her features seemed disproportionately large; her lip jutted and her nose had a slight hook.

Emily stood with her back to him. She must have noticed the look of horror on her sister's face because she turned and gazed out at Reed. A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth, as if his presence confirmed her arguments. When she spoke it was as much to him as to her sister.

"No coward soul is mine
No trembler in the world's storm-troubled sphere
I see Heaven's glories shine
And Faith shines equal, arming me from Fear."

Emily sighed and the image of her sister on the sofa shimmered and disappeared. Suddenly the furniture was covered with sheets; the portraits vanished. Emily waved her hand as if dismissing a servant and Reed lost his grip.

He lay where he had fallen for some time, eyes clamped shut. The colloquy of the two dead sisters whirled through his fevered imagination again and again; Charlotte's futile concern, the fierce pride with which Emily had claimed her solitude. He was terrified at the thought of how easily Emily manipulated what he had perceived as reality. Might she not on a whim consign him to nothingness as well?

Reed sensed that he was not alone. He rolled onto hands and knees and saw a squad of twelve wooden redcoats, tiny bayonets at the ready. One of them gestured for him to stand. With a shriek, Reed leapt away from them and ran around the house. He bounded up the steps of the front portico and battered on the door. It swung open. Stumbling into

the great entrance hall, he crossed the boundary between dream and nightmare. Darkness closed around him; the air was as cold as a tomb. He scrabbled up the stairs, whimpering like a frightened dog. The door to his room was ajar. The candles on the mantleshelf flickered in the icy wind that gusted through the open window. He slammed the sash, blew out the candles and hurled himself into the bed. There were no sounds of pursuit, only the hiss of the dying fire and the rattle of the window-panes as the storm swirled around the house. However, he seemed to hear a voice—her voice—in the wind's moaning. "Sleep," it urged. "Sleep." He could not resist it.

IV

"It's half past ten, Mr. Reed. Is it your intention to sleep all day?"

Reed awoke with a shiver. His hostess was standing in the doorway.

"If you're going to reach town before sunset you'd best get started soon." She went to the windows and parted the curtains. Sunlight reflecting from the snow-covered moors dazzled him. He sat up, blinking. "I'm afraid you'll have to walk. I keep neither horse nor carriage."

She took his coat from the chair by the fireplace and brushed the wrinkles out with her hand. "Your coat has dried nicely." She brought it over and laid it across the foot of the bed.

Reed was confused. He waited in vain to be rebuked for leaving his room and violating the conditions of her hospitality. He would not have been surprised had she announced that she was a devil's pawn and that his soul was forfeit. Yet she acted as if nothing had happened. He re-examined his memory in the clear morning light. Might not his terror have been the stuff of nightmares? He pushed the covers aside and swung his feet out of the bed. "I have had the strangest dream!" he said.

"I don't doubt it, Mr. Reed. There are fresh eggs and bread for your breakfast. Would you care for tea?"

He pulled on his boots. "I beg your pardon, ma'am, but did you have any visitors last night?"

"Visitors?" She smiled. He remembered how she had smiled when she had seen him at the window—but, of course, that must have been a dream. "I seem to remember an unfortunate gentleman who appeared on my doorstep begging for shelter."

He frowned and reached for his frock coat. It was still slightly damp, her assurances to the contrary.

"You needn't bother with the bedclothes. Come down now and eat."

Reed followed her down the stairs to the entrance hall. He had the eerie feeling that the people painted on the wallpaper had changed places. His hostess turned toward the kitchen wing. Reed hesitated. A doorway in the opposite direction opened onto the parlor where he had seen the two sisters.

"This way, please."

He did not move. "You have a remarkable house, ma'am." Every detail of the room was as he remembered it. There was a stack of birch logs in the dusty marble fireplace. Sheets covered the sofa and the chairs. There were even shadows on the wall where portraits had once protected the paint from fading in the sun. "I can't believe that you live here alone."

She shrugged wordlessly and once again gestured for him to follow. Instead, Reed gazed about him, as if admiring the magnificence of the grand stair hall. On the wallpaper in front of him was painted a scene of a ruined seaside village. A gentleman and lady were strolling its outskirts along a dirt road. A shepherd sat with his back to an oak, watching his flock graze. Reed gathered his courage. "Pardon me, ma'am, but do you have a sister named Charlotte?"

"Oh, Mr. Reed!" She stamped her foot in impatience. "What is the purpose of this interrogation? Clearly you have some question which you are burning to ask me. Come to it, man!"

Reed stiffened. "I did not mean to be impertinent."

"Yet you're succeeding admirably." She sighed. "I had hoped to keep you in ignorance. For your own good. However, if you insist . . ." She waved her hand.

The painted lady twirled her lace parasol. The sheep looked up as the shepherd lifted his pipes and began to blow a mournful tune. The gentleman pointed at Reed and laughed.

"Dear God, ma'am! Dear God."

There was a rumble behind him. A volcano belched gray smoke. Picnickers looked up in alarm and then hurriedly stuffed their supplies into a basket. The leaves in the trees shivered in the wind.

Emily Brontë was frowning at him. "Will you come to breakfast *now*, Mr. Reed?"

V

She set a plate of fried eggs in front of him. He tasted them gingerly. They were bland, like the dry toast; more an appearance of food than the thing itself. Reed wanted desperately to believe that he was still dreaming. Perhaps he was dozing on the train; he tried to convince himself that the blood pounding in his ears was actually the sound of wheels crossing rough track. "I simply can't believe it," he said. "I can't believe that you're . . ." The word seemed to swell in his throat; he felt as if he might choke on it.

She sat down across from him. She seemed to study the table top as she said,

"There is not room for Death
Nor atom that his might could render void
Since Thou art Being and Breath
And what Thou art may never be destroyed."

Reed sipped lukewarm tea. He was stunned to silence by the prosaic

manner of this—ghost? Spirit? He would have expected Byronic misery, howls of anger against the unjust fates, but not this. Not a bit of mid-morning melancholy over eggs and toast. Certainly this was not the Emily Brontë he had expected.

"We buried my brother, Branwell, in the graveyard of my father's church in Haworth. Branwell died of consumption, brought on by his shameless dissipation. It was cold in the church; I took a chill that grew in me. My sisters feared I too would succumb to consumption. For myself, I had no fear. It was a lesser part of me that ailed; my spirit, the cold fire within me grew ever stronger. And then I seemed to step out of time, to this place. It's what I had hoped for. This is where I belong."

"But that's . . . preposterous!"

She bowed her head slightly. "As you say."

He dared not believe her. Although in his soul he now glimpsed a level of existence transcending reality, Reed clung to the notion that this was all an illusion. To do otherwise was to accept the fact that he, too, was forever locked out of time. That he, too, was dead.

"And your family. They can visit you?"

"They are creatures of my memory. Thep ast is like a great poem, Mr. Reed. *Paradise Lost* never changes, yet one returns to the same unforgettable lines again and again."

"Then you are alone?"

"You value your company too lightly, Mr. Reed." Her eyebrows arched; Reed laughed nervously. "From time to time I receive visitors like yourself. I can't say why they come;I don't know what happens to them when they go. And even when I'm alone in this house, I watch from my windows and worlds rise up before my eyes. I see men and women as real as you passing before me. They laugh and die and fall in love. I've made my choice and I'm content."

"And you never go out?"

"No." She looked away from him. "It's an experiment I have not seen fit to try. You see, none of my visitors has ever returned."

Reed pushed his chair back from the table. He did not envy this woman; he could not find it within himself to pity her. There was something profoundly disturbing about Miss Emily Brontë. The quiet power of her solitude terrified him, yet at the same time he was fascinated by it. He realized, however, that he was not willing to barter his life—however mundane—for spiritual transcendence. Reed knew he must try to escape. "But you say I can go?"

"You are your own man, Mr. Reed. You may do as you wish."

"Then I must take my leave." He stood. "How far is the nearest town?"

"Follow the road east. You should reach Haworth by sunset. From there you may hire a carriage to take you to the railway station at Keighley."

She led him to the stair hall. The people on the wall went about their business, indifferent to his passage. Emily Brontë opened the door. There

was a wooden gate now at the end of the walk. Reed stepped through and buttoned his frock coat against the cold. The winds had died and the snow glistened in the midday sun. He hesitated.

"Won't you come with me?" He was surprised to hear himself say it. "I—I cannot believe that you will be happy in this house. By yourself, I mean." He felt like a fool.

Her anger came suddenly, like a winter squall sweeping across the cold sea. "Why is it, Mr. Reed, that people like you always ask the same questions? Do you imagine that I am made of stone, that I am immune to regret and temptation, even here?" Her hands curled into fists as if she meant to strike him—or herself. "If I suffer in this place it is because I *chose* to remain, not because I'm helpless! Your cruelty is thoughtless, Mr. Reed; I suppose I must make an allowance for that. But go now; I can no longer abide the sight of you." She propelled him from her house. "I watch, Mr. Reed. It is enough because it has to be." She slammed the door.

He trudged through the gate and down to the road. There were fresh tracks in the snow and he followed them to the east. Halfway up a hill Reed paused to look back. He expected she was watching him. It was then that he noticed the farm cart following him at a distance. He waited for it, heart pounding. Snow crunched beneath the crude wheels as it approached. Reed plastered a smile on his face and waved. The driver was an old man in a dirty homespun greatcoat. He muttered to the horse as he reined in. "Mim! Mim! Mim! Did ever Christian body see aught like it?"

"Excuse me, sir, but I've had an accident. Can you give me a ride to the village?"

The old man looked doubtful. "Is't Haworth ye want?"

"Haworth would be fine, thank you."

"Come along then."

Reed climbed up beside him. "I can't thank you enough. I'm a stranger here, an American, and I wasn't at all sure that I was heading in the right direction."

The old man tapped the reins and said nothing.

"I wonder if you can tell me, good fellow, who lives in the house back there." Reed pointed. "I stopped there earlier but no one seemed to be home."

The driver turned for a brief look backward. "House?" He stared at Reed. "And they think *I'm* blind. I see nought but a ruin what's been since the time yer grandfather was a King's man. It's empty; ye may have it all to yerself, if such be yer pleasure." He laughed.

Even as he spoke, the roof seemed to disappear. The stone wall crumbled; the windows gaped like the empty sockets of a skull.

They reached the top of the hill and the old man grunted. "There be Haworth."

Across the valley Reed saw a village of small dark stone houses. The

roofs were covered with sooty snow. There were a few hulking mills with stacks vomiting smoke into the blue sky. He imagined that the people who scuttled down its narrow streets would be like the old man, crass and shabby, mired in the material world. These were his people; he felt a tingle of horror at the prospect of passing among them.

The cart trundled down the steep slope. He shivered and looked back one last time at the ruin, gray and alone in the snow. ●

CHILDREN'S LESSON AT LOINES OBSERVATORY

For F.Y.

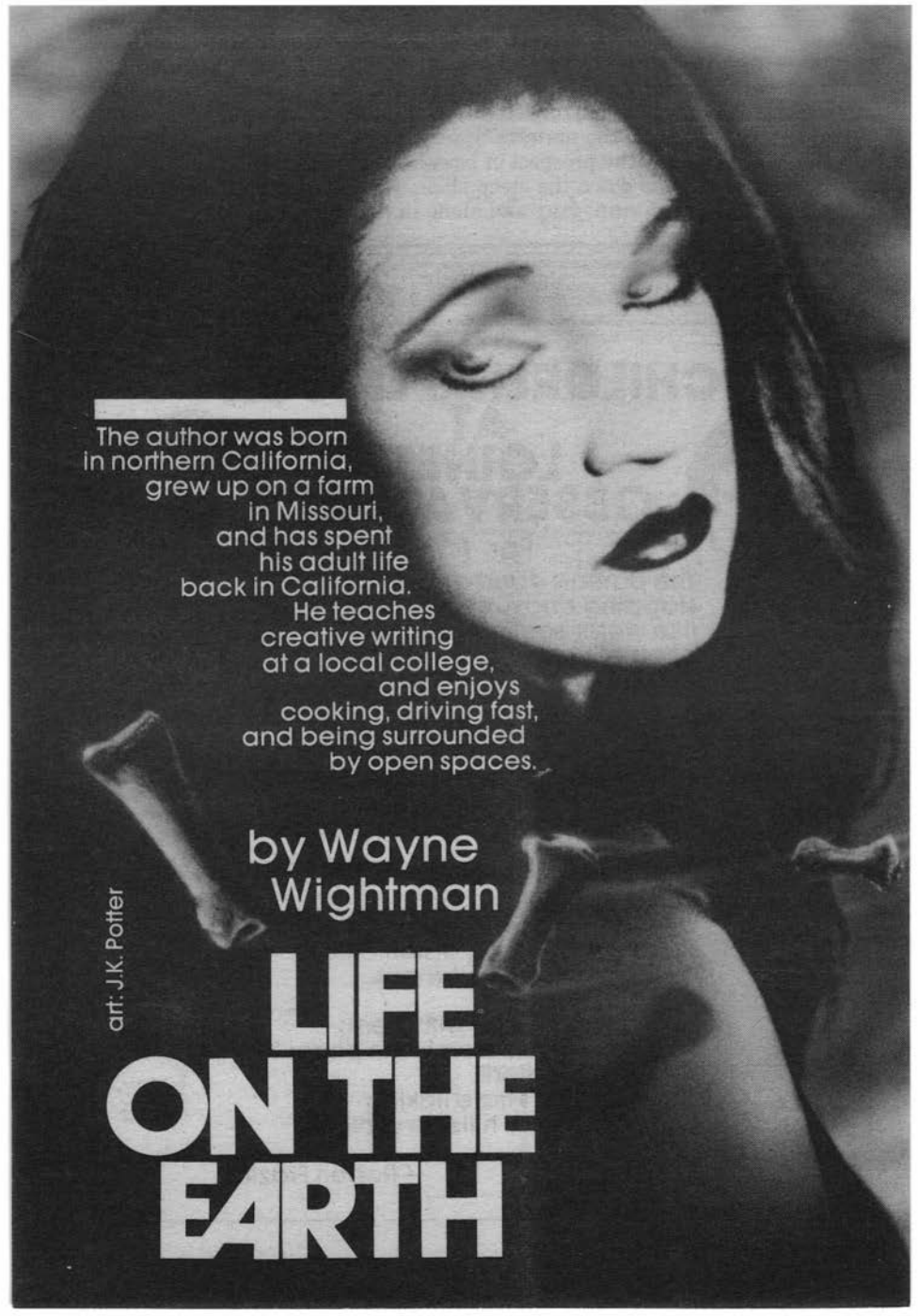
The parents stand apart
slapping and rubbing their arms
like water-soaked campers
attempting to light kindling
with a flint.

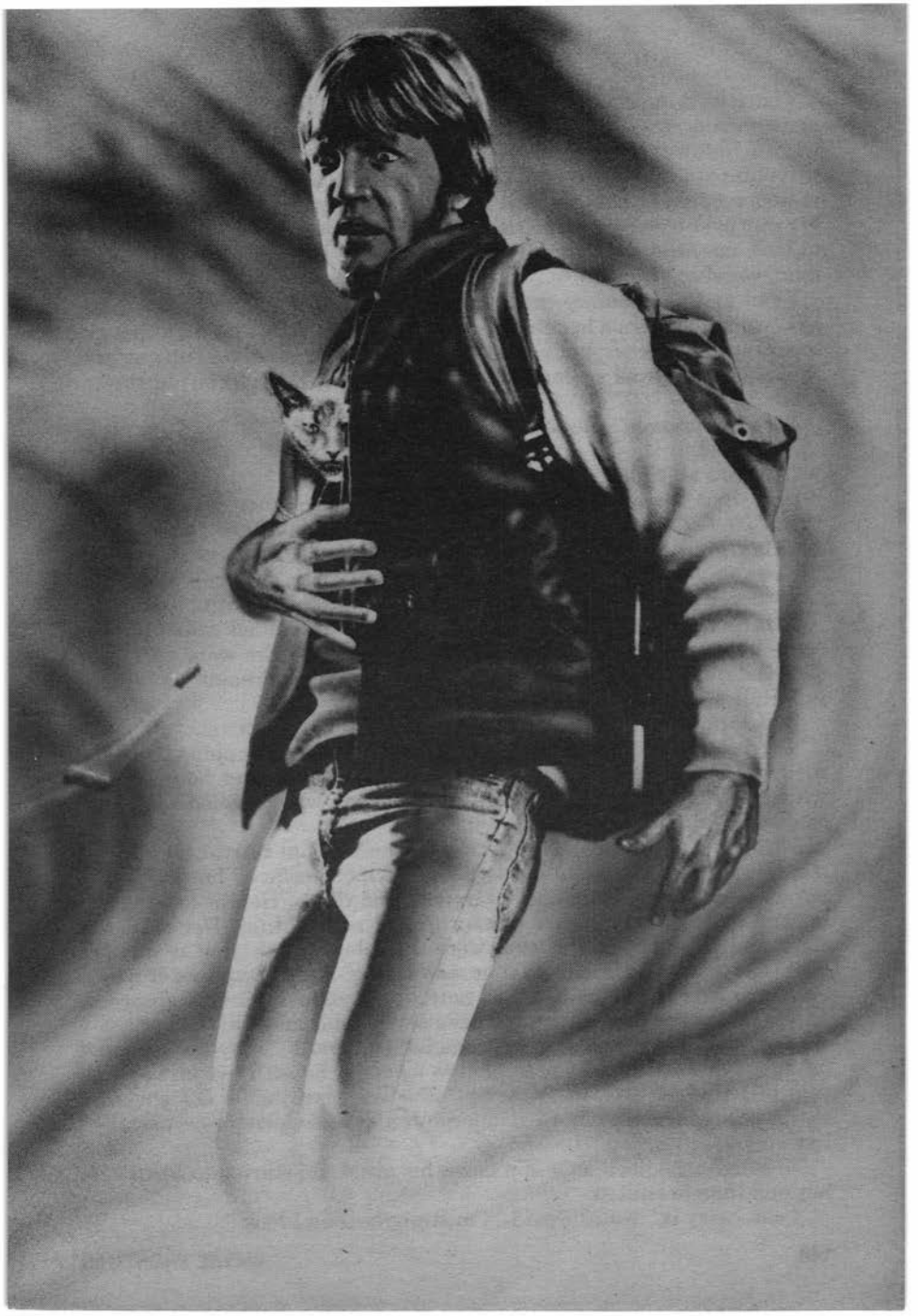
Oblivious of whorling mosquitoes,
whining galaxies of hunger,
the young astronomers line
up at the outside telescopes,
form centipedes with glass heads.

I stand with the curious,
transfixed still
by shiny coins waving
in the atmospheric distortions,
by the numbing distances.

I will always stand with them;
each mind centered in the blurry
spiral of questions,
like a bonfire's flare licking
against the vast hillside of night.

—Robert Frazier


The author was born
in northern California,
grew up on a farm
in Missouri,
and has spent
his adult life
back in California.
He teaches
creative writing
at a local college,
and enjoys
cooking, driving fast,
and being surrounded
by open spaces.
by Wayne
Wightman
art: J.K. Potter
LIFE
ON THE
EARTH



There he was, standing in the middle of the Nevada desert with his mouth open, speechless. He and his cat, Artie, had walked along the ruined highway for eighteen days, skirting washouts, rockslides, and traveling at night when they went through any area where he suspected someone might be camped. But a moment ago, as he had carefully picked his way over a stretch of melted and rubble-strewn asphalt, he happened to look up—and there she was, about twenty feet from the side of the road, watching him.

Even at that distance, he could tell that her dress was silk—green silk—and it sheathed her slim body like a second skin. Standing between several tumbleweeds, her arms loosely folded, she gazed casually at him. Her black hair was so dark it seemed to drain the light out of the air around it.

"Good afternoon," she said.

He stared.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

He closed his mouth; his throat made a noise when he swallowed. "Yes." He looked around, scanning the low hills for others who might be with her—he was not so taken by her beauty that he forgot to be cautious. He saw only sagebrush and tumbleweeds and Artie's white staring face a few dozen yards away. Artie held something in his mouth.

"I'm alone," she said. One of the tumbleweeds rolled aside and she came forward. Her dress was slit up the side and she wore open-toed shoes. He was amazed. This was better than his daydreams. "My name is Natalie," she said.

"I'm Jack."

"I've been watching you for half an hour," she said, stepping up on the roadbed. She moved liquidly, and the silk dress slid over her skin like wine down a glass. "And I thought that anyone who traveled with a cat couldn't be that dangerous."

Jack hoped he could conceal his nervousness. "That's Artie. He adopted me." He fished a rag out of his pocket and wiped his face. "I'm sorry—I'm not used to talking to anyone but myself, and you—" He was looking her up and down. Never had a woman looked so beautiful. Her skin was clear and smooth, and her eyes were the color of teak—but it was her hair that made him forget what he was saying: it fell in a chaos of waves and curls and it was as black as nothing—it didn't shine, it absorbed. Jack couldn't recall what he had been saying and shook his head.

"You look tired," she said with the faintest smile. "Why don't you let me carry your pack, and you can follow me to my house. I live just around that hill. Should we wait for Artie?" She was reaching for the shoulder straps of his ragged pack. He had forgotten what a clean woman smelled like.

He caught the pack as it slid down his arms. He started to hand it to her and then hesitated.

"I can carry it," Natalie said. "I'm stronger than I look."

"I want to be sure of something." He took a step back from her and dropped the pack at his feet. "I need to be sure I'm not hallucinating. I shouldn't be meeting someone like you in the middle of nowhere."

"This isn't nowhere," she said seriously. "This is practically my backyard. It's a very nice house, too."

"I just don't expect . . . I mean, the way you're dressed—"

"I saw you coming. I thought you might like it. I get lonely too, you know." She easily picked up his bag and swung it over her shoulder. The sweat-darkened nylon lay against the sleek green of her dress. "Your lunch is already on the table." She stood and waited for him to take the first step.

He wiped around his eyes with the rag and stuck it back in his pocket. "Just one other thing," he said. "If you have other people over behind that hill, and if you're planning on robbing me, you can tell me now and you can have the pack. It's all I have. Except for Artie. You can take it."

"You play it safe, don't you?" She didn't seem insulted.

"I got this far."

"If I played it safe," she said, "I wouldn't be offering you lunch."

They stared at each other, and in the horizon-to-horizon expanse of sand and scrub, nothing moved.

"I'm glad you took the chance," Jack said. "I accept."

She grinned a little and cocked her head. Her hair seemed to vibrate against the air. "Smart man," she said, turning away and starting back toward the hill. "For lunch, I have iced tea—"

"You have ice?"

"—rabbit, and canned berries."

"Where did you get those things?" he asked, following her.

"I trap the rabbits. I trade for the other things. I also have wine for this evening."

He decided to say nothing to that and to wait and see—he had wanted to make ten more miles that day. As the woman walked ahead of him, he watched the silk switching from one side to the other, outlining her shape. The bones in her shoulders moved with smooth precision.

"I was hoping you would be a nice person," she said.

"I am. People wait alongside roads just to ask me to lunch. I'm starting to think you're not a hallucination. After walking through this place for a few weeks, madness doesn't seem like such a bad idea. I'm from Michigan and I'm on my way to California." They skirted a cluster of tumbleweeds. "I've heard there are some good things happening out there."

Natalie walked through the scrub without once snagging her dress, without stepping crookedly on a rock or having to stop and empty her shoes. She strolled easily around to the edge of the hill, holding his pack as though it weighed nothing. He couldn't take his eyes off the way the silk moved around her hips, and every several steps, the slitted side would open and reveal her long legs—it took his breath away. She stirred dim memories of a time long ago when things had been different: when

he had lived near a stand of forest, when his parents had been alive, when every romance had been a prelude to a love that would live happily ever after. Once, his life had been a feast. Now, he walked through Nevada.

Natalie stopped and pointed off to her left. "Is that Artie?"

Fifty feet away, a small white head rose above the scrub and stared at them. Artie held in his jaws some desert rodent.

"That's him. He'll follow. He doesn't trust strangers much." He called Artie and the head disappeared. "Not many cats left anymore."

Natalie continued on around the edge of the hill. The top of the windmill came into view.

Jack couldn't see Natalie's face unless she glanced to one side or the other, and when she did, her delicate profile was shrouded in her black hair. He imagined that if he buried his hands in it, they would disappear from sight. He imagined moving his hands from her ankles, up along her calves, up her thighs, around the edge of her hip bones, to her stomach. . . .

"Artie found me in Colorado," Jack said, breathing heavily. "It was raining and I was sleeping in an old barn. When I woke up, Artie was there. He'd brought me a rat. His idea of a peace offering. He always offers me first what he's caught. I let him have the rat." A corner of the house came into view. He craned his neck to see a little more. "Artie is a manx," he continued, "and we're friends. He listens when I talk. And I'm talking too much."

"No," she said, turning to face him. "I haven't heard talk in weeks. Don't be self-conscious." She walked on.

"Do you have any animals?"

"Only several rabbits, which I keep in cages. For food."

"Oh."

"You're a vegetarian?"

"Most of the time. If I have a choice."

"Do you try to feed Artie carrots?"

"Since he's my friend, I try to overlook the way he's designed."

When she turned her head sideways, he could see there was a faint smile on her lips. "You're designed the same way. You weren't meant to be a grazer and a browser all the time. Some of your teeth are just like Artie's—made for eating meat."

"Sometimes, that's what I eat. Usually not by choice."

Below the windmill's tower, he could now see all of her house. It was a two-story glass and stone building, very modern, undamaged, and surrounded by dozens of green shrubs and trees. In the hollow of three hills, her house was an oasis of green in the beige monotony of the desert.

"It's beautiful," he said. "I never would have thought—"

"How could you expect that I would live in anything less?" She smiled.

He shrugged. "You *are* wearing silk," he said. "I guess having a house like that is only natural."

"Of course." There was a path now, which she followed, his old pack jouncing on her shoulder. Although it was fairly warm already, he noticed that she was not sweating—as though she didn't notice the heat. "When I saw you coming," she said, "I thought, a man traveling with a cat is a good sign. I thought this might be a man whose company I might enjoy."

It occurred to Jack that a person who stood out in the sun for half an hour—she had said she had watched him that long—should sweat just a little. She could sweat demurely, but she should sweat a little. Jack felt an old uneasiness creep back into his bones.

The bushes around the house grew densely halfway up the east side, and on the west end, thick eucalyptus trees shielded the stone wall from the declining sun. Beside the front door, there was a wooden tub of lavender flowers.

"Where did you watch me from?" he asked off-handedly. "Do you have binoculars?"

She shook her head. Her hair seemed to grow momentarily blacker and denser. "No binoculars." She went up to the door and opened it. Jack could smell the roasted meat and the lavender flowers together. "I watched you from the livingroom," she said as she went inside.

Jack followed his nose into the house—whatever she had done to the rabbit meat, it smelled so rich he could nearly nourish himself from the aroma. He imagined it lying on a platter, crusted brown and gold and dripping with fat. Around the corner, he saw the table set for two, the white china plates, the napkins folded in fans, and in the middle sat a covered tray. His mouth watered, but when he stepped into the diningroom, his eyes automatically checked left and right.

"Really," she said, "I'm alone."

"Sorry." Jack decided to believe her. "I need to wash my hands and face," he said.

"Behind you, second door." She was smiling now and seemed more relaxed. She dropped his pack in the corner of the room, beside a large potted fern. "You could shower, if you want. I put towels out."

"I'll just wash up." He went through the entryway and paused to look in the livingroom. "How could you watch me from in here? The hill is in the way."

"My bones told me you were coming and that you had a cat." She stood beside him now. "Look there on the low table," she said as she pointed. There was a piece of cardboard with a ten-inch circle drawn on it and a few markings around the circumference; in the middle of the circle were seven or eight small objects that looked like dirty cigarette butts. "Those are my fingerbones. Sometimes they tell me what's going to happen."

"I see."

"Do you still want to have lunch with me?"

When he breathed, he smelled the roasted rabbit, and when he looked,

he saw a woman with teak eyes, deep black hair, and lips he would have walked across Nevada to kiss. Through the green silk, her nipples made two distinct bumps. He took a deep breath.

"I'll go wash up," he said, exhaling.

She looked pleased. "Good."

Natalie spooned the green translucent berries onto his plate. Thick syrup pooled around them. "Gooseberries," she said. From a steaming pan she served sliced potatoes.

Jack forced his hands to stay under the table—the smells were activating hungers he thought he had forgotten. "Is that cheese?" he asked, staring at the melting cheddar on the potatoes.

She smiled and nodded as she seated herself. "And this is the rabbit." She lifted the cover from the tray. "Will we be eating meat this afternoon?"

As he had imagined, the meat was brown and golden, crisped to black in a few places, and steaming. Saliva squirted into his mouth. "Yes," he said, "we will be." He spread the napkin on his lap and looked up and grinned. "I'm feeling civilized already."

"We should do our best in difficult times," she said. She took two of the larger pieces of rabbit and placed them on his plate.

Jack was almost afraid to begin—afraid that his food would dematerialize in his fingers and that he would waken in the broiling sun, three-quarters mad, his mouth filled with sand, and raving. Or, worse, he feared he would lose control and eat like a dog in front of this woman.

Natalie reached across the table and touched his wrist. Her black hair shimmered when she moved, trapping the light in its tangling curls. "We should do our best to be civilized, but we should also eat when we're hungry."

His face prickled with embarrassment. "I haven't used a knife and fork in so long. . . . And I haven't eaten meat in an even longer time."

"Since it's on your plate, it would be the only polite thing to do."

"I guess so." He was starting to like her. Even aside from the food and the house and her mysterious hair and the green silk dress and the bumps of her nipples—aside from all that, he was starting to like her.

They sat on the upper balcony, facing west. The air was warm and still. A hundred miles away, under the afternoon's declining sun, lay the purple and gray peaks of the Sierra Nevada mountains. Streaks of white snow outlined their edges.

"That's where I'm going," Jack said. The iced tea in his glass was half gone. He gazed at the ice cubes and wondered vaguely how long it would be before he saw ice cubes again. "I can be there in five days."

"But after you got there, where would you be?" Natalie asked.

He was liking her more. "A person never knows till the time comes."

"Besides, this is October—the weather could be bad. And I've heard

there are gangs there—'nations' they call themselves—and you would have to travel at night." She sipped her tea. The ice in her glass clinked metallically. "The evenings are getting cooler."

"That's why I wanted to hurry. I could be on the other side by November first."

They sat quietly. In two hours, the sun would touch the mountains and the air would chill. But now it was warm. The desert lay before them in slow rolling waves of beige and gray. The windmill stood motionless. Abruptly, Natalie stood up and touched his shoulder.

"Excuse me a moment," she said.

Jack put his glass on the decking beside his chair leg and then leaned back and propped his crossed ankles on the balcony rail. It was a position he thought he could get used to. His second thought was of Artie. He wondered where he was lurking. He had asked Natalie to save the scraps from their meal for him.

"I'm back," she said. She sat down and placed the cardboard square in her lap. "I'll ask my fingerbones if it's too late for you to cross the mountains."

Jack saw that around the edge of the cardboard were compass directions and other unidentifiable symbols.

"What exactly do these things do?"

She opened her hand and showed them to him. The bones were smooth and rounded, as though from much handling, smaller in diameter than a pencil, and they were stained a yellowish-brown. He didn't like them.

"Sometimes they can tell what's going to happen. Sometimes they protect me, sometimes they can make things occur that wouldn't otherwise."

"Handy to have around."

"Very much so." She adjusted the cardboard in her lap. "I had two things I wanted to ask. First, is it too late for you to start for the mountains?" She looked up for assent. He nodded and she dropped the bones onto the cardboard. After the briefest moment, she said, "The bones give an emphatic yes. It's too late."

"Are those things ever wrong?"

"Never."

Jack nodded politely.

She reached across and placed her hand on his arm. "They're never wrong, but I'll forgive you for not believing them yet."

He had to grin. He was starting to like her a lot, eccentricity and all. "I'm willing to be convinced," he said.

"Okay. This wasn't my second question, but just to convince you . . ." She swept the bones into her palm and recast them. To Jack's eyes, there was no pattern, no significance in the way they lay on the cardboard. Natalie pointed to the southwest. "Artie is over in that direction, and he'll come up to the house around eight o'clock this evening."

Jack could see nothing in that direction but the scrub-covered desert.

"We'll see," he said.

"*You*'ll see. I already know where he'll be at eight o'clock."

"We should be back on the road at eight."

"That brings me back to my original second question." Natalie cupped the bones between her hands and gave them a circular shake. "Should I open my bottle of wine?" The bones made a dull rattle on the cardboard. She no more than glanced at them and then gazed into his eyes; she almost seemed to hold her breath for a moment before she said, "I'll have to find my corkscrew."

"You're going to open it for me?"

"For us," she said casually. "I've had it nearly a year already, and it could go bad." She stood up and started to leave but turned back. "Jack, you will stay this evening, won't you?"

"I have to stay until eight to see if Artie shows up. And by then it would be dark. . . ."

"And then you'd have to start looking for a place to sleep."

"I guess the only intelligent thing to do is stay," he said.

"There doesn't seem to be any other reasonable choice."

"There is one thing," he said. "Could I take a shower now? It's been a while."

She took him by the hand and led him back into the house and down the stairs. The bathroom was off the hallway, not far from the front door. It was tiled a pale blue at the ceiling, and the closer to the floor, the deeper the blue became—it gave the illusion of being underwater. On the counter lay a mirror with a Japanese design on the ivory handgrip.

"The soap is there," she said. "Here's a towel. And use as much water as you want. There was enough wind yesterday to pump the storage tanks full, charge up all the batteries, and then some. So take your time. Enjoy yourself." For a moment, their eyes met. Then she left him alone and softly closed the door.

The Chardonnay was five years old—it was rich and smooth and buttery. They drank it a sip at a time. At five till eight, Natalie suggested that Jack take the plate of rabbit bones to the front door. "Artie will meet you there," she said.

"We'll see." On the plate Jack carried were leg bones and a fan of ribs. On top of it all, Natalie had placed the rabbit's skull, boiled clean of all meat.

When Jack opened the door, Artie's white face tilted up at him.

"Want to come in?" Jack asked him.

Artie's nose began to twitch. He stood up on his back legs, trying to see what Jack had in the plate. Jack knew not to tease him with food—Artie often demonstrated that in the matter of his survival, he had no sense of humor.

When the plate was on the porch, Artie sniffed it once, looked up at the humans, and started backing away, his head hunched into his shoulders. He growled like a dog.

"He doesn't like strangers, does he?" Natalie asked.

"He doesn't trust any animal bigger than he is." Jack pushed the door closed with his foot, leaving Artie outside with the bones. "Do you like cats?"

She smiled and wrapped her arms around his neck. "Do you believe in my bones now?"

His hands moved around her hips. "You have wonderful bones. And eyes. And hair."

When his lips touched hers, he remembered that he had forgotten what it was like to kiss a woman. His tongue moved between her teeth as her hands traveled up his back. Her mouth was hot and wet and pulled him deeper into her. Her mouth tasted sweet—sweeter than anything they had eaten, sweeter than a human mouth should taste. Her saliva was hot and syrupy and tasted faintly of cinnamon. On the back of his shoulders, her nails pressed small crescents into his skin. He pushed his mouth harder against her, entering her more deeply.

She pulled back suddenly, and staring into his eyes she said, "Come with me." Her teak eyes gleamed.

She turned down the hall and grasped his hand in the same motion. In the dimness of the room at the end of the hall, the white bed appeared to float slightly above the floor. The sheets made a hissing noise as she slid across them, turned, and held out her hands toward him.

"Come to me," she said. "I need you."

Half reclining on the bed, he held her and kissed her hard, moving his tongue across the tips of her teeth. He kissed her neck, pulling some of her skin between his lips. She breathed quickly and deeply.

Natalie stood on her knees and slipped the silk dress off over her head and tossed it onto a nearby chair. Again, she held her arms out to him and lay back against the pillows.

He had forgotten that high-pitched jittering thrill in his solar plexus—but as he gazed momentarily at her, the sensation was so strong it made him open his mouth and gasp for breath. He lay beside her, sliding one arm under her neck and pulling her against him with his other.

"Stay with me," she whispered against his neck. "For a few days, stay with me. Then you can go, if you want." Her hand moved inside his thigh and held him firmly.

"For a few days," he murmured, running his hand along the slow curve of her back, past her waist.

She moved atop him and stared into his eyes. Her black hair blotted out everything around her face. "I need you," she said. "I need you now."

Jack pulled her down to him and kissed her opened mouth. Her tongue entered his mouth quickly, and at the same time, her fingers found an opening in the front of his shirt and she pulled, ripping it open. He heard a button roll across the floor, and then she was on him.

The desert was beautiful in December. Jack sat outside the house,

leaning against the south wall, sunning himself. The air was cool and the sky around the sun was tinged with the faintest shade of violet. In the west, no longer beckoning, the Sierra Nevada lay against the horizon like the wadded edges of a blanket. The land was utterly silent.

Enjoying the air and the light this way, living through his skin, he reminded himself of Artie. He missed Artie. Since the night they had arrived at Natalie's, Jack had not seen him. Often he tried to remember the last moment he had looked at him—when Artie had bunched himself up and had backed away growling. And Jack had closed the door on him. Months ago. Months that seemed like weeks.

Through his life, Jack had dreamed of someday not having to work sixteen hours a day to earn enough food so he wouldn't go to bed hungry; he dreamed of someday not having to be on the move from one place to another, avoiding the harsh weather or food shortages or disease or whatever else came along. He did not dream that he would find what he was looking for in the desert. Sometimes at night he still awakened, thinking he was sleeping in an abandoned car or in a ditch or a culvert.

He stretched himself, stood up, and went back into the house. Natalie was out making the rounds of her traps. She caught rabbits mainly, but sometimes she brought back chuckawallas or one of the small wild dogs that inhabited the deserts after the Accidents.

Shortly after he had come to Natalie's house, he had gone with her to the traps. In one of them, a jackrabbit had caught its foot and had chewed it most of the way through. Casually, Natalie cracked it across the back of its neck with the short club she carried. Jack said nothing. After all, he would happily eat its flesh the next day. In one of the other traps was one of the dogs. It had pushed the trigger plate with its nose and the trap's jaws had closed on its snout—it lay whimpering and did not move when they approached. From the look in the dog's tiny brown eyes, it seemed to Jack that the animal was prepared to die. While the small brown eyes followed her, Natalie stepped to the side of it, drew back the stick and made it hum through the air as she brought it down on the top of the dog's head. She had to hit it twice, and the second time, it made a wet grinding thump. For two days Jack ate no meat. He didn't go with her to the traps again.

As he walked through the cool house, his eyes caught on the square of cardboard and the fingerbones . . . the ever-present fingerbones. Without exception, upon arising, she would gather them in her hands, breathe on them, and let them fall onto the square. She would study them a moment and then announce, "A traveler is coming up the highway today around eleven," or "Nothing in the traps today," or she would look up at him and smile and say, "My bones tell me that I should be very good to you today," and she might begin by unbuttoning his shirt. "They tell me I should eat you up."

Jack picked up the fingerbones and weighed them in his cupped hand. They looked like little yellowed twigs.

"I'd rather you didn't touch them," she said from behind him.

He turned suddenly. "I'm sorry." He felt caught.

"They're very important to me."

Jack noticed that there was a small smear of blood on her left hand.

"They aren't easy to come by," she said. "And we'll be having rabbit for dinner."

He nodded unenthusiastically and sat on the sofa.

"I could fix something else. Something without meat. There's a man coming along the highway later this afternoon—maybe he'll trade me something for the rabbit. He'll be carrying some canned goods."

Jack didn't question her about how she knew these things—it was always, "My bones told me." In fact, he had grown accustomed to her knowing things that were hidden from him; it had become ordinary.

She sat beside him and kissed his neck. "There's nothing wrong with killing these animals," she murmured. "You and I are predators. Look at your teeth—they're made for cutting and chewing meat. Your teeth give you license. You forgave Artie for being a carnivore—can't you forgive yourself?"

"Even if I accepted it, I wouldn't like it. I can't forget the day I went with you."

She reached around his shoulders and kissed his neck again. Her lips were cool and moist. "We'll see what turns up this afternoon."

He did not go with her to the highway. She forbade that he go with her when she traded with the travelers. "I can do better alone," she had told him. "Besides, if it weren't safe, my bones would tell me." And always she brought back something good—canned food usually, a shirt for him or a pair of pants, antibiotics, kif, or sometimes liquor. Although he did not go with her, he noticed that she never met the travelers near the house. She would meet them a mile or two up the road. And once, lately, he saw her come back with both the clothes she said she had traded for *and* the rabbit carcass she had taken to trade with. He did not question her, for, at the time, she seemed especially exhilarated.

That night, after their lovemaking, while the sweat was still on their bodies, Natalie said, "My bones told me you would do those things."

"I thought I would surprise you."

"The surprise wasn't the best part." She nuzzled him.

"Where did you get your fingerbones?"

"It's a long story, she said softly.

"I'm not sleepy."

"You wouldn't like to hear it."

"I would."

She propped herself up on one elbow. In the dim room, her hair was blacker than anything. "Jack, I don't want to tell you because I'm afraid you won't like me as much."

"I can't think how knowing more about you would make me love you less."

She lay back on her pillow, staring up at the ceiling. Her hair bushed around her face. "My mother had fingerbones that she used all the time I was growing up. It was the family secret, but it seemed very normal to me. I kept asking for my own, and when I was fifteen, she took me for a walk and explained how . . ." She was silent for a moment.

Jack waited. Outside, far away, he could hear the yipping of wild dogs.

"She explained how I would get them. Her bones had already told her that a man . . . a stranger . . . was going to try to hurt me while I was out hunting a couple of days from then. She told me that he was just another animal—like a rabbit or a burro or a prairie dog—and that was how I was to treat him."

"You got your fingerbones from the man who attacked you."

"Yes." She was nodding. "It isn't a nice story."

"Tell me what happened."

She rolled toward him and stared into his face. Her eyes were black. "He surprised me. He hit me in the back with a rock. And while he was on me, he tried to smother me with his hands." She paused. "Could you hand me the water?"

Jack gave her the cup from the bedside table.

She drank and he heard her take a deep breath. "He held his hand over my mouth and I bit him." She paused again. "That's where I got them. I remember him standing over me, holding his hand. First, he screamed like he was hurt, and then he screamed like he was going to kill me. He reached for his knife, as my mother said he would, and then I used his fingers for the first time. I rolled them in my hands and threw them at his feet. I didn't know what would happen—but he froze where he stood. Only his eyes could move. As my mother said I should do, I treated him like a dangerous animal. I took his knife out of his hand and finished him."

Jack put his hand on her waist. "You're tougher than I thought. But you're the same person you were an hour ago. I love you as much now as I did then."

"You won't leave me tomorrow?"

"Someday I want to see California."

"I need you here. I didn't know how lonely I was before you came. Everything is better now. I like getting up in the morning. I like the hunting and collecting and fixing. I love going to bed at night. And since you've been here, the bones work better than ever before. The power is greater." He heard her take in another deep breath. "Jack, I'm afraid if you know too much about me, you won't like me as much."

He smiled and hoped that in the dimness she could see how he felt. He touched her hair. His hand disappeared into it. He felt the clean smoothness of the skull inside her scalp. Jack slid his other arm beneath her and rolled her atop him as he kissed her mouth. He could feel her hard nipples against his chest.

She gripped his shoulders and forced her mouth against his. Their legs

locked together and he held her hard against him. They made love like animals.

In the silence of howling dogs, Natalie lying on his chest, their legs still entwined together, Jack realized that she was sleeping. Her hair, a jungular mass of curls, billowed next to his face and blotted out everything.

It was February and warm and he liked to stroll through the desert. On certain days, like this day, the glassy air seemed to magnify the hills and mountains in the distance. He watched his feet as he walked, wending his way between waist-high tumbleweeds. A cracking noise off to his left drew his attention. He listened but heard only the buzz and chirp of insects. Then once more, there came a cracking snap.

He quietly moved toward it. Rounding another tumbleweed, he stopped. He saw something black, something low to the ground. Even more quietly, he moved closer.

In a small clearing littered with bones, Natalie crouched with her back three-quarters to him. She was chewing slowly. In her hands she held the hind portion of a rabbit. Delicately, she snapped the leg bone of its pelvic socket and tore the thigh away from the body. Blood dripped from her elbows. She bit into the thigh and pulled away a stringy mouthful.

Jack went back to the house.

"Tell me another secret about yourself," he said, holding her hand. They stood on the balcony, and overhead, the stars were so thick they made clouds against the blackness. The stars did not glitter.

"I was loved once by a man who tried to change me. He thought I was a witch. My using the fingerbones made him uneasy, so he hid them from me and locked me in a room. He thought he was curing me. I knew he was going to do it and I knew how it would turn out. But I thought I could change things. . . . I wanted him."

Jack held her hand a little more firmly and then moved her fingers to his lips.

"He tried to be good to me, but he didn't understand. It frightened him when I got out and walked straight to where he had buried them. Then he tried to take them away from me again."

"He tried to be tougher than you, didn't he?"

Her eyes downcast, she nodded. "I'm not changeable. He didn't understand. He tried threatening me and came at me with a stick while I was kneeling there with my matted hair and my hands full of dirt, trying to find my bones. I scratched them out and had them in my hands when he tried to hit me. . . . And all I could think of was to throw the bones at his feet and hope." Natalie turned her face away.

"And?"

"A lot of it was my fault because I was so secretive about what the bones could do, and he thought I was in league with evil spirits. It was

then that I decided not to conceal what I could do from anyone I cared for." She looked down at her hands. In the dim starlight, her hair was a darker blackness.

"What happened to the man?"

"His bones burned." Her voice strained over the words. "I was young and I wasn't careful. Tell me a secret about yourself."

Jack gazed across the plain of the desert, the dark shapes of tumbleweeds blotting the surface. "I miss Artie," he said. "He's walked with me through rain and mud and desert, all the way from Colorado. He even swam part way when our boat capsized halfway across a river. I miss him. He's probably dead."

"He was just a cat."

"He was just a cat, but he was my friend."

"He was an animal. He stayed with you because you fed him. The only reason he didn't eat you is because you're bigger."

"No. Artie was my friend."

"Then why didn't he stay? Predators don't have friends. They have necessities. You're seeing the world as you think it should be."

"Really."

"Friendship doesn't fit into the mechanics of survival. Everything on earth is food for something else—you and I, Artie, and whatever ate Artie. Life feeds on itself. Life is regenerated by death. In the mouth of every living thing you will find the remains of something dead. Sometimes, the dead thing was a former friend."

"It's a marvelous system," Jack said. "I still miss Artie. I was his friend and he was mine, predator or not." Jack let go of her hand and leaned on his forearms on the balcony railing.

"Jack," she said softly, "don't dislike me for being a part of the way the world goes." She hugged him and nuggled her face between his neck and shoulder. Her hair smelled of sage. "Kiss me," she whispered.

His hand brushed across her breasts as he turned toward her. Their lips pressed together and again he tasted the heavy sweetness of her mouth. It was a syrupy taste, always there, always surprising, and in these latter weeks, he had decided that it was not always pleasant.

"Let's go in," she breathed in his ear. "Come in with me now."

"In a few minutes."

"Don't be long." Before she moved away, she touched his cheek with the backs of her fingers.

"I won't."

She began unbuttoning her blouse as she went back into the house.

Jack gazed across the dark plain to the low line of darker mountains—the Sierra Nevada. California mountains. He wondered when the passes would melt open. May? June? He had planned to cross the mountains with Artie leading the way. And now—

Jack caught his breath. Now he knew what happened to Artie—he wouldn't have just run away: he was caught, in one of Natalie's traps,

caught there and then killed with a crack across the head, and she wouldn't have told him because it would have affected the way he felt about her. And she wouldn't tell him because it wouldn't seem that important to her. What was one cat more or one cat less in the way the world goes?

His heart pounded in his ears, an intimate thunder across the silence of the desert. Of course Artie was dead, and he had died, of course, slowly. How had he managed so long to avoid recognizing the obvious?

"Jack?" Natalie said from inside.

"Yes," he answered. He turned and went in. He found Natalie in bed, waiting for him.

"What were you thinking of?"

"Just enjoying the air and the stars."

"Enjoy me now," she said, touching herself.

That night, later, he dreamed of California, green valleys, and trees heavy with fruit.

It was March, and he stood in the desert, facing the wind, facing West. Tumbleweeds loosed themselves from the desert floor and bounded around him. Stringy black clouds trailed across the sky, clouds out of the West that were born in the Pacific. He wondered how deep snow was on the passes. He wondered how he was going to get away.

Natalie wanted him to stay—in their lovemaking, she told him how much a comfort he was to her, how much she needed him, wanted him, how empty she had been before he had come.

And then she had her fingerbones. Every day she crouched over them and rolled them once, twice, sometimes as often as five times in a row—and then she would sit back and look content. How could he leave her if she always knew the future? The only way, he thought, was to do it when it would be a surprise to himself as well. It couldn't be planned. He would simply walk out one day when she went to check her traps. While she was gone, he could hide the fingerbones—that might delay her for a while, in case she tried to come after him, to convince him to come back.

Over the Sierra Nevada, the clouds thinned out and the sky there began to glow with feeble spring light.

He hunched his shoulders and turned his back to the wind and started for the house. He knew that it would not be easy to leave, even if she said, "Fine, go." He loved her. It was as simple and complex as that. But she was beginning to frighten him. For a while, in the winter, he was only uneasy, but he had again seen her do other ugly things. One day while he was out walking, by accident he saw her come upon a trapped dog, put her club aside, and strangle it with her hands. And on one other occasion, he had seen her eating raw meat at the clearing that was littered with bones . . . he thought of it as her feeding place. And gradually he had come to realize that she ate very little except meat, and the

stories she told about herself were steeped in violence, although when she told him about one incident or another, she worded it gently. Worse, that sweet taste in her mouth had taken on overtones of ripe meat. Kissing her sometimes revolted him. Nonetheless, he loved her. He did. Until lately, he could tell her anything, everything, and she always understood, always accepted—he had let her know him, and she had loved him more. He would never forget her, he loved her like none before, but he was leaving.

Tumbleweeds bounced erratically across the desert. One bounded past him, in the direction of the house. Jack turned up his collar and put his hands in his pockets. He was getting cold.

"Maybe we'll have something nice for dinner tonight," she said excitedly. "The bones said this would be an unusually full day."

"You're going out early," he said. His stomach had involuntarily tightened. He tried to keep his voice calm.

"I might have to make two trips if enough of the traps are full. Want to come?" She always asked.

"No, I wanted to read this magazine again—and maybe go for a walk later."

"Oh," she said, touching her finger to her chin. "I just remembered: I had a dream about you last night."

He raised his eyebrows. He was beginning to sweat.

"You were far away, at the end of a long tunnel, and I was running to meet you." She looked puzzled. "It was a tunnel, but it was very bright. I remember I was glad to see you again, so we must have been apart for a while."

"I dreamed about Artie," Jack said. "I dream about him a lot."

"I know. Well." She turned and pushed the screen open. "Maybe we'll have something nice for dinner. Bye," she called as the screen hissed shut. He heard her footsteps recede across the yard.

Now was the time. Quickly he gathered food and his tattered blanket and stuffed them into his old sweat-stained pack. He knew he should leave a note—he would put it under her pillow so she wouldn't find it too soon. She could think, at least for the afternoon, that he went out for a long walk. She wouldn't be suspicious until the late afternoon.

In a note he tried to explain that he loved her but that he was afraid of her—and that he had to leave this way. He apologized in the note and felt small for what he was telling her—almost to the point of giving up the whole plan.

But he decided to carry through. Last, he had to do something with the fingerbones. He hated touching them after he found out how she got them. Delay was all he could hope for—he knew she could find them no matter where they were hidden. He laid a magazine over the cardboard square, hoping that would disguise the theft. He went back and added another line to the note, apologizing for what he was about to do. Again,

he almost gave the whole plan up when he thought how angry she might become. That made him afraid. He slipped his arms into the sweat-stained pack straps and ran out of the house.

By late afternoon, about the time he figured she would start getting worried, he estimated he had covered close to ten miles on the ruined highway. Along the first two or three miles, he had tossed one fingerbone after another into ravines, into deep cracks in the pavement, into jumbles of heavy boulders, or into the yawning desert.

By nightfall, he had gone another five, but he kept moving—always looking back into the gloom for any hint that he was being followed. Once he thought he saw something, and he decided to walk all night if the highway was not too badly broken up or melted.

After several hours, he came to a low rise, and at its crest he could look ahead at the faint ribbon of gray pavement that stretched to the next horizon—twenty miles away or more. He sat down to rest a moment, propping his legs up on an unearthed boulder. His muscles throbbed.

Whether Natalie would come after him, he didn't know. He suspected she wouldn't, but if she did, he didn't think she would do any more than try to change his mind. He didn't think . . . There was a noise in the brush. He held his breath.

Once more he could hear small weeds being pushed aside, not far from the edge of the highway. He moved into a crouching position and then crept on all fours across the highway and eased his body noiselessly down the embankment into the shallow ditch. He listened. Nothing.

"Arr?"

Jack looked up. Artie's white face stared into his. Artie held a small grasshopper in his mouth.

"Raa," Artie said, dropping the insect in front of Jack's face. He purred huskily.

"Artie—my god, what's happened to you?" Jack ran his hand over the cat's coat. It was thin and raggy and undulated over every rib. "Oh no," he said as he felt Artie's right front foot—half of it was gone. "One of her goddamned traps." The wound felt healed. "You were hanging around the house all these months, weren't you?"

Artie purred louder.

Jack climbed back up to the highway, opened his jacket, and stuck Artie inside. "From here on, pal, you can ride."

An hour later, Jack stopped and looked behind him. He could still make out the crest of the hill where he had stopped, but looking forward, where the line of highway led deep into the gloom, it seemed that he had made no progress. He walked on.

Off to the side, something caught his eye—it was a tumbleweed, rolling along the desert floor. Ahead, several of them lumbered across the road, hanging up momentarily on the jutting asphalt of the road and then rolling on.

Inside Jack's coat, Artie purred contentedly, his face hidden. On the other side of the road, Jack saw half a dozen tumbleweeds rolling over one another, pacing him.

"No," he thought. "Oh, no . . ." He froze where he stood—his skin turned to ice.

There was no wind.

Ten feet away, a dark tumbleweed hit a rooted bush, leaped high into the air, spinning like a wheel, and hit the ground moving even faster.

There wasn't a breath of wind.

Then, as though a gale blew in every direction at once, tumbleweeds rose like heavy wingless birds from across the desert floor and rolled toward the highway. They bounded into the air, landed and jumbled together, and flew into the air again. Once at the margin of the asphalt, they would arc over to the other side, touch ground, and arc back, creating on the starlit plain a dark, squirming tunnel that reached to the horizon. And as violent as the actions were, there wasn't a sound except for the hushed hiss of tumbleweed thorns, hooking and unhooking as they clashed and shuddered over the road.

Jack held one hand on Artie, keeping the cat's head buried in his jacket. Jack tried to back away, but more tumbleweeds moved behind him, blocking his way, and then they rose above him, crossed overhead, and cut him off from the sky. From behind, one of them rolled closer and plucked at his pants with its thorns. He jumped forward. Over his shoulder, he saw another one move nearer. There was nothing left to do but keep moving down the road, the direction they pushed him.

In the deeper darkness, he stumbled on the broken asphalt, and overhead there were no stars, only the frenzied tangling of the tumbleweeds and the *ting* of their clashing hooks.

Then, as they flew back and forth, leaping over the highway, they began to burn. At first their hearts glowed, caught fire, and the burning then seeped along the branches to the thorns, which glowed white. There was no heat—there was only brilliant blinding yellow light, and when his pupils adjusted, he could see, far away, at the most distant end of the tunnel of fire, a dark figure, not more than a speck, but he knew it was Natalie. It was Natalie come back in her green silk dress. Natalie the predator, and he was the prey. She could take him back or she could kill him, as though he was no more than one of the yipping dogs she had strangled and eaten raw.

Inside his jacket, Artie stirred but did not struggle. Jack held him by his scruff, hoping he would not see what was happening and bolt.

The figure grew larger—yet it didn't seem that she walked or ran—she simply glided nearer, her green dress fluttering tight against her body as she moved through the air.

"Jack," she whispered. She had stopped a dozen feet away, but her voice sounded as though her lips were against his ear. "Jack, come back with me."

A tumbleweed nicked him from behind and he moved a step closer to her.

"Come home with me," she whispered, the tumbleweeds blazing around her. "Come back now, make love to me, come home."

"No," he said. "I want to leave."

Artie twisted his head to look around. Jack did not feel the claws as they extended and hooked through his shirt, into his skin.

"I won't go back. You kill things too easily."

"Come back," she whispered. "You'll understand." She waved one of her hands behind her and then brought it forward, casting her fingerbones onto the asphalt between them. The frenzied tumbleweeds moved faster and glowed brighter. One of them rolled at him, hooked the back of his jacket, and slung him several steps closer to her. Artie growled.

"Come to me, Jack. Come to me now."

The fingerbones snapped from the ground back into her opened hand. Again, she threw them across the asphalt and again, his jacket was snagged and he moved two steps closer to her. Overhead, the tumbleweeds burned white.

"Come home. Sleep with me, eat with me, be what you are. Learn to listen to your blood. Love me and understand what you are."

Jack couldn't breathe. He could see her eyes now—they were golden, and her hair was a billow of blackness around her head, an aura of night in the midst of fire.

"Come home with me, drink with me," her voice whispered in his hair. She stood only a few yards away now, gliding minutely nearer, one hand drawn back, ready again to cast her fingerbones.

"I won't be like you," Jack said, "if you're the way I'm supposed to be." His voice quavered. "You're too friendly with death."

She rolled the bones at his feet and he froze with fear. Then she held her hand out to him, as though she expected him to take it. Her face hardened in concentration. "Be like me, Jack. Be who you are. Be like me, and go safely."

Artie dug his back feet into Jack's belly and lunged for her. The cat wrapped himself around the outstretched hand, a fury of fangs and claws. Natalie did not move. Natalie smiled, showing her teeth. The manx growled and slung its head and kicked. With her arm still outstretched and unmoving, as though the cat weighed nothing, Natalie's eyes never left Jack's.

"Stop it!" Jack said through his terror. "Stop!"

Natalie held her free hand in front of her and the fingerbones on the ground flew back into her palm. With the cat still mauling her other hand, she drew back and threw them again, this time straight at his eyes.

Jack dodged and threw his arms in front of his face. When he opened his eyes a second later, he saw Artie fall out of the air down to the pavement. And Natalie was gone. The tumbleweeds were gone. But glare

had numbed his retinas and he could barely see. Artie's white shape crouched in front of him, the fur along his back still puffed up. The cat's face and front feet were wet with blood. Artie sniffed tentatively at several small dark shapes that lay on the pavement in front of him. Jack leaned forward to see what they were.

Three fingers, covered with blood. Natalie's. One of them curled gently over the other. The nails had been polished, and it didn't occur to him till much later that he had never known Natalie to color her nails. So. This was her gift.

As he crouched there, staring at them, he knew that she had him. He didn't know exactly what that meant, but he realized that she had undoubtedly foreseen everything that would happen, and she had known that she would not be able to persuade him to return with her. So why had she followed him—why had all this happened? He stared at the severed fingers lying before him, and never, never had he felt so cold. Never had he felt so cursed.

The ocean whumped lazily against the rocky shore. Inland from the beach grew tall shaggy redwoods surrounded by complex ferns. Here, one day in midsummer, Jack sat in a patch of sun with his back to a tree. At his feet, Artie watched a leaf, waiting for a breeze to make it move.

In his hand, Jack held six little yellowed fingerbones. He wondered if he should cast them. And if he did, would he be able to see any meaning in their pattern?

Months ago, out in the desert, he had pushed those pieces of her into a sandy hole with the side of his boot and had tried to go on, not understanding what had happened there but badly wanting to be out of the place. Artie wouldn't be carried, so Jack walked down the highway until Artie trotted around him and dropped three small dark objects on the broken asphalt at Jack's feet. Jack quickly buried them again and Artie dug them up again and once more dropped them at his feet. Jack kept walking and ignored the cat. By sunrise, scrawny Artie was dropping further and further behind, still carrying the three dark things in his mouth.

Finally, standing there in the ruddy desert morning, Jack knew he was beaten. Natalie knew he would try to escape, she knew what Artie would do to her, and she knew that as revolted as he was by the gift the cat was offering him, he would not leave Artie behind, and Artie would not leave behind what she had given him. And so she had him, he knew it, and he was starting to suspect what it meant.

Now, leaning against the tree, warming in the sun, Jack held his set of fingerbones in his hand. He had never used them; he was afraid to, and he didn't think he knew how.

"What do you think, Artie?"

The manx fell over on his side and stretched himself into the shape of a parenthesis mark.

Jack closed his fingers on the warm bones, drew back his hand and thought of food—hot steaming food with butter dripping off it, sweet red fruit, a melon perhaps—and ice cream. It had been years since he had eaten ice cream. He threw the bones on the ground beside him.

If there was a pattern or something to read, he couldn't see it. What he saw were bones. Little yellow bones lying on the black earth.

"Excuse me?"

Jack looked up. The woman couldn't have been much over twenty. She wore a faded denim jumpsuit and carried a small pail of blackberries. Her fingers were dark from picking them.

"I didn't mean to frighten you," she said. "But I'm from a settlement about half a mile from here, and if you'd like some company and something to eat, I'll show you the way."

"I'd like that," Jack said, casually scooping up the fingerbones and dropping them in a pocket as he stood up. "I haven't had a good meal since . . . since I was in Nevada."

"My name's Victoria," she said, glancing at the cat.

"That's Artie, and I'm Jack."

Artie pretended to sleep.

When Victoria smiled, her teeth were white and even. She was very pretty, and Jack saw it. "Tonight we're having venison," she said. "One of the men got a deer yesterday."

Jack felt a shiver of expectation. He imagined the meat sizzling over a fire, the fat spitting as it squirted into the coals. He imagined the smell of brown and golden meat.

Victoria led him away, and as they walked through the redwoods, ferns switching their legs with green lace, Jack felt unexpectedly at home, at ease, comfortable walking through this place. He hungered for talk and company, for Victoria, and for the food he imagined to be waiting. As he walked noiselessly across the soft ground, thinking of his desires, he felt an inexpressible joy that Natalie had loved him as much as she had and that now, at last, he was part of life on the earth. ●

ON BOOKS

by Norman Spinrad

GENERATION OF 1984

It's just too much to resist; everybody is doing it this year, so why should I be any different? Yes, "1984" is strictly a piece of arbitrary numerology, but it is, after all, a piece of *science fiction* numerology. And, no, writers don't really enter the field in nice neat bunches conveniently packaged between years ending in zero. Nevertheless, the history of the genre's evolution *does* lend itself to organization along rough decimal parameters, so 1984, arbitrary numerology or not, is as appropriate a year as any, and more appropriate than some, to take a preliminary look at what sorts of SF careers have begun more or less in the 1980s and what general trends portend for the rest of the decade.

The 1930s, generally known as the "Golden Age" of science fiction, really extended through World War II, literarily speaking, and might more accurately be called the "Dawning Age" of science fiction. This was the era when SF's first generation of "giants" appeared and basically created the first modern American science fiction. Heinlein, Asimov, Clarke, Van Vogt, Bradbury, Kuttner and Moore, Leiber, and so forth basically began their careers during this era, and so powerful was their influence upon the field that many of the biggest of today's "Big Names" are still drawn from this 1930s generation.

The 1950s, in SF terms, really began in 1946 or so with the end of the war, and by the time the SF decade of the 1950s ended, along about 1965, the field had been utterly transformed by the emergence of active SF book publishing and by a whole galaxy of new stars like Sturgeon, Anderson, Dick, Dickson, Knight, Budrys, Pohl, Kornbluth, Bester, Miller, and literally dozens of others. If the 1930s generation basically founded modern science fiction, the 1950s generation transformed it into a novelistic medium, gave it a large and healthy dose of the soft or behavioral sciences, introduced a new emphasis on characterization, and made literary style a subject of some concern.

The generation of the 1960s (which began in about 1964 and ended in about 1971) was, of course, the first to actually get named, which is to say this was the "New Wave" generation. An astonishing number of writers who are still more or less prominent today be-

gan publishing between say, 1963 and 1966. Zelazny, Delaney, Disch, Moorcock, Russ, Le Guin, Malzberg, Wilhelm, Ballard, Benford, yours truly, and many, many others. As I've said, generations of SF writers don't really fit neatly into these arbitrary decades; there were writers who made their debuts before 1960, like Ellison and Silverberg, who nevertheless seem to fit in the 1960s generation, in that they seemed to have found their own true voices during this period. Nor, of course, were all the SF writers who came into their own during this era necessarily "New Wave" types, for this was also the debut era of writers like Larry Niven who came into prominence bucking the "New Wave" trend.

What *was* the generational trend of the 1960s? Among other things, an entirely successful smashing of previous sexual taboos, experiment with form and prose, a more radical political consciousness and a somewhat higher level of political concern, more focus on characterization and outré forms of consciousness, and in general less emergence of the dominant writers from the ranks of science fiction fandom.

The science fiction generation of the 1970s is more elusive of definition, both in terms of duration, and generational *weltanschauung*. In the SF field, the 1970s may be said to have begun about the actual turn of the decade, and it is an open question (which we will explore shortly) as to whether they are over yet.

Some of the writers to begin their careers or come into prominence in the 1970s era include John Varley, Vonda McIntyre, Edward Bryant, Gardner Dozois, George R.R. Martin, Orson Scott Card, Joan Vinge, Somtow Sucharitkul, Ian Watson, Michael Bishop, Jerry Pournelle, and Joe Haldeman, among the usual many others.

If it is hard to pin down the impact the 1970s generation had on the field, that may be because it was not so much the 1970s generation who had an impact on the field but the times which had an impact on the writers. For the major trends of this era were not so much a matter of new literary styles and concerns as of marketing, pedagogy, and feminism.

The 1970s were of course the era of the Great SF Boom. When the '70s began, SF writers could count on a limited and modest range of advances and sales for their books, and by the time they were over, the skies (or at any rate the national best-seller lists), were the limit. Then too, the 1970s were the era in which fantasy arose from virtually nowhere to all but dominate SF publishing. Unicorns, dragons, wizards, and barbarians took their places beside rocketships, aliens, scientists, and hardware as imagistic clichés of what became the "science fiction and fantasy genre."

In addition, the 1970s were the era in which the virtual male monopoly of SF writing and editing was utterly shattered, mirroring the general breakdown of stereotyped gender roles in society at large. The readership too lost its overwhelmingly male predominance; which was cause and which effect or whether both were effects of yet another cause might be the subject for another essay entirely.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly of all, the 1970s were, and the 1980s still are, the age of the writers' workshops. This has been a truly revolutionary (or perhaps, from a certain perspective, devolutionary) development. All previous generations of science fiction writers were more or less self-taught. They wrote the stuff, put it in envelopes, and mailed it off. Maybe they served some kind of amateur apprenticeship in the fanzines, but until the advent of Clarion and other workshops, the main instructors of science fiction writers were working editors, who rewarded their "students" not with marks or praise but with *sales* and who admonished with rejection slips.

The teaching of science fiction writing in an academic or quasi-academic setting is strictly a post-1960s phenomenon. But during the 1970s, SF writers' workshops proliferated, and processed scores, if not hundreds, of would-be SF writers, and many, many, of the 1970s generation of actual SF writers passed through this process. So entrenched has the notion of SF writers' workshops become that some published writers still attend them, and others, published or not, form their own impromptu groups where relative novices critique the work of fellow novices at some length and often in great detail before this work is ever even seen by a prospective purchasing editor.

Whether this is "good" or "bad" is something I do not choose to get into in these terms, but certainly it has had a formative if not dominant influence on the 1970s generation. In general, the crop of the 1970s have learned to write finer prose, more expertly-crafted short stories, and seem to have a more acutely-tuned sense of character nuance.

On the other hand, they seem to have produced fewer truly major novels (the novel is hardly taught in these workshops at all), much less stylistic experimentation, fewer really revolutionary "ideas," and in general seem less concerned with science and politics. When they do write novels, these all too often tend to be novel *series*.

When Damon Knight ran the original Milford workshops in the 1960s, established writers worked as equals with people who had published a story or two, and the motto was "No Chiefs and no Indians." With Clarion and its successors, this is emphatically not the case; experienced SF writers put on pedagogues' bonnets and teach unpublished writers as well as writers in the earliest stages of their professional careers.

So perhaps the SF boom, combined with the proliferation of writers workshops, is the reason the 1970 generation of SF writers never quite established its own distinctive literary impact on the genre. Better crafted conventional prose, yes, some fine works, of course, and bigger advances and sales, for sure, but no real evolutionary mutation.

This has lead some to demand that science fiction "get out of the classroom and back into the gutter where it belongs."

Or at least back onto the barricades.

* * *

So much for history. The question now before us, nearly halfway through the 1980s, is whether we now have a new generation of science fiction writers arising who are beginning to make a new kind of mark on the evolution of the field, which is to say whether or not the 1970s have truly ended in an esthetic and literary sense and whether a new generation of science fiction writers has begun to produce a science fiction which critics of a decade or two hence will be able to fairly consider as characteristic of the 1980s.

Considering some of the writers who are just now beginning to make their marks on the field, things do seem to be getting interesting.

For one thing, we are beginning to see a small but significant new crop of writers entering the field as loners from left field as it were, rather than from the communities of either the workshops or fandom, and, as one might expect—or at any rate, hope—what they are producing is somewhat weirder and more idiosyncratic than what we have become accustomed to lately.

Case in point, Rudy Rucker, mathematician, esthetic kinsman of Sheckley and Dick, with a whiff of William Burroughs and even the Beat writers of the late 1950s. Novels like *White Light* and *Spacetime Donuts* and the stories in *The 57th Franz Kafka* are structured around mathematical and metaphysical conundrums. *Software* deals with robot psychology on an existential level seldom if ever reached before. Which is not to say that there is anything tendentious about Rucker's fiction. The man is both funny and witty, which are not quite the same thing, he plays with human consciousness from a forthrightly psychedelic viewpoint, and manages to be humane and biting, "serious" and humorous. He's a "hard science" writer who seems to have digested scientific and mathematical matters better than most of the breed and an "inner spaceman" in more ways than one without losing his balance. It is karmically perfect that he was the first winner of the Philip K. Dick Award. Lately Rucker has taken to issuing "esthetic manifestos," which may not say too much for his sanity, but which at least openly displays a passionate commitment by this relative newcomer to the further evolution of the art.

Another case in point of a somewhat different kind is James Morrow, who has thus far published two very interesting, if somewhat flawed, novels, *The Wine of Violence* and *The Continent of Lies*.

The Wine of Violence uses SF to set up a metaphysical exploration of violence and repression in a pseudo-Aztec culture on an alien planet. It is a "serious," indeed almost overearnest, first novel and it is very well written indeed in a conventionally translucent prose. Its strength is also its weakness, namely that Morrow is writing as a self-consciously "literary" writer in this one, isolated from both the conventional formulas and extrapolative rigor of science fiction written by writers well-connected to the traditions and society of the genre and its practitioners.

The Continent of Lies, on the other hand, despite its portentous and solemn title, is a comedy in an entirely different style, which could have been written by Sheckley, Dick, or for that matter, Rucker. Set in a far galactic future, its hero is a critic of "dreambeans," an hallucinogenic art form, charged to track down a "lotustree" which is producing ghastly bummers in the audiences. While the plot eventually gets caught up in its own convolutions and the coherence of Morrow's projected galactic society eventually unravels, it is witty throughout, and almost excessively madly inventive.

Such a range displayed over a writer's first two novels is impressive indeed. Morrow is a good example of a writer who has, to good effect, thus far developed in isolation from the whole SF apparatus. What he would seem to need now is either serious study of the existing literature, contact with sympatico colleagues, or tough editing by someone who really knows science fiction.

A.A. Attanasio, on the other hand, has published occasional short fiction for some time, though he never seems to have really been heavily influenced by the genre. His first novel, *Radix,* was published in 1981, and his new novel, *In Other Worlds* is about to be published as this is written. *Radix,* for my money, was a tremendous achievement for a first novel, which somehow never got the attention it deserved, to the point where there doesn't seem to have ever been a mass-market edition. Set on an Earth radically transformed by passage through energy beams radiating from the galactic center, it is a metaphysical and world-creating tour-de-force somewhat reminiscent of *Dune* but told in a rather supercharged and semi-psychedelic style entirely appropriate to the world and the story.

In Other Words, alas, carries metaphysical world-creation to a confusing and disjointed excess, with its hero (or perhaps more truly one of its heroes) transported to a bizarre milieu orbiting within the accretion disc of a giant black hole at the end of time, from which he returns to an alternate past Earth possessed of all sorts of arbitrary and arcane powers. Here Attanasio lays it all on with a trowel—astrophysics (or pseudoastrophysics) that Einstein would have trouble following, all sorts of involuted and vaguely-defined time travel, alien villains who eat human pain, and a heroine the rescue of whom is the hero's grail but whose key relationship with same takes place almost entirely offstage. Which is not to say the book is without its virtues; Attanasio is very good at getting inside his main characters' heads, excellent when the setting is contemporary New York, and seems to be trying to say a lot of difficult and interesting things in this one, if only one could figure out what.

Like Morrow, what he would seem to need on his next novel is a bear of a science fiction editor to keep his interesting prose and metaphysical obsessions within the bounds of a coherent story and to make him extrapolate with more rigor. One near-masterpiece and

one promising failure whose flaw at least has nothing to do with modesty of literary ambition.

Nor is the generation of the 1980s without writers carrying forth the torch of "hard science fiction" into the realms of literary excellence, metaphysical concerns, and character development.

Paul Preuss, who had written two previous promising novels, really comes into his own with *Broken Symmetries,* a novel much like Gregory Benford's pioneering *Timescape* in both intent and successful execution. Like *Timescape,* this is a novel genuinely about scientists doing science (and also about scientific journalists doing scientific journalism) and, like *Timescape,* the focus is on the characters and their relationships as much as on the science, nicely epitomized by the fact that the title refers to both the scientific problem and the lives of the characters, so that the novel manages admirably to make each a metaphor for the other. Preuss obviously had high novelistic ambitions in this one, which is to say that *Broken Symmetries* stands up very well indeed in comparison to, say, the works of C.P. Snow and manages to attain the level of Benford. If there is a flaw in the book, it is that Preuss' obviously self-conscious attempt to imbue this SF novel with all the conventional virtues of "mainstream" sometimes causes him to lay on more geographical local color than is really necessary or natural.

Another writer with the potential to develop into a Benford or a Preuss is David Brin, whose *Startide Rising* won the Nebula for best SF novel published in 1983. This, along with his first novel, *Sundiver,* is set in a future in which man has raised dolphins and chimps to full sentience and in which the galaxy abounds in alien races all of whom would seem to have been artificially raised to sentience by "patron races" and who must serve long apprenticeships as "clients." Only man seems to have evolved to sentience naturally, and efforts of other races to claim man as a "client"—which is to say lackey—race seems to be the McGuffin of what appears to be turning into an open-ended series. Brin is a working scientist, is therefore strong on science, and is also very good indeed on a prose and character level. In *Startide Rising,* he has depicted dolphin consciousness better than anyone has before, and, quite unusual in an SF writer who lards his fiction with a profusion of aliens, he is very good with human depth, too. He can even write passable haiku.

His weakness, if such it be, is plotting. *Sundiver,* an otherwise well-structured novel, ends with a teaser for *Startide Rising,* in which a human spaceship discovers a fleet of ancient alien vessels holding the bodies of what may be the original progenitors of galactic sentience. *Startide Rising* begins with that ship crashing on a water world, and ends, more than 500 pages later, with it escaping from a veritable UN of hostile alien races with absolutely nothing resolved, setting up the reader for the next exciting installment of what may turn into an endless tale in soap-opera format.

One hopes this is naive inexperience rather than cynical commercial manipulation, for Brin is a writer of enormous potential, and novelistic structure is a lot easier to learn than the mastery of prose, character, and scientific extrapolation which he already has well in hand. So too may it be easier for an idealistic new writer to discover how to write a real novel with a self-contained structure than for a cynical manipulator to sacrifice commercial success for literary art. Let us hope that with David Brin we are dealing with former rather than the latter.

Penultimately, as if to prove that *all* generational generalizations are at best half-truths, including my own, we have three outstanding first novels by writers who *have* gone through the workshop process.

Interestingly enough, all three are published as part of Terry Carr's revived Ace Special line, which published so much of the best SF of the 1960s.

Lucius Shepard's *Green Eyes* is a kind of contemporary scientific zombie novel which begins rather unpromisingly with a soporific dose of Southern Gothic magnolias but then builds and builds and builds into an unholy and marvelous combination of gris-gris, psychological power, mysticism, punk sensibility, and evocation of the true weirdness of that most bizarre of the 50 states, Louisiana.

Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Wild Shore* is set in a future in which America has been literally decimated by 3000 neutron bombs and is inhabited by a small population of scattered and isolated villages. Cordoned off by the rest of the world, which was left untouched, the U.S. is the "Wild Shore" in question. Henry, the protagonist, never gets further from his home village of San Onofre than San Diego, nor does the reader get a very clear picture of the great world beyond, though he is tantalized, as is Henry, by a book called *An American Around the World* (which may be true, or may be a compendium of tall tales), and by glimpses of the wider world seen as through a glass darkly. Although this is a long novel indeed, it is quite claustrophobic, and goes entirely against conventional SF expectations, which would have Henry voyage over the sea to seek a broader understanding for himself and the reader. Ultimately, *The Wild Shore* is quite a frustrating read, but that would seem to be Robinson's intent, for Henry's life, and by extension that of these latter-day Americans, is one of circumscription and frustration. As in his excellent novelettes, Robinson displays an absolute mastery of the use of point-of-view to put the reader, like it or not, inside the world he is portraying.

And William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, perhaps the most interesting novel of these three, mentioned in my previous column, brings an entirely new electronic punk sensibility to SF, both in content and in prose style. It has been a long time indeed since a first novel established such a new and unusual voice with this degree of strength and surety.

* * *

And so what do all these books finally say about the 1980s generation of science fiction writers? Tritely, one can certainly say that the range and variety of all these promising books and writers mean that no narrow generalization can be made. We are witnessing the emergence of many new writers writing everything from humanely-enhanced hard science fiction, to metaphysical humor, to computerized punk fiction, to a bizarre conjunction of contemporary consciousness with Southern Gothic, to the post-nuclear tale as a Bildungsroman. If there is a generalization to be drawn, it is both banal and truthful to say that the 1980s generation seems to be broadening the field stylistically by returning to the concept of the science fiction writer as a self-taught loner following his own star, *after* having absorbed the lessons of the more communally oriented 1970s.

But rather than end this essay with such a wishy-washy generalization about the futility of generalization, let us finally consider *Dr. Adder* by K. W. Jeter, which was written at the tag-end of the 1960s or the beginning of the 1970s, depending upon how one wishes to karmically account such matters, and which kicked around for the entire decade of the 1970s and more before finally finding a publisher in the 1980s.

Surely this is one of the strongest first novels to be published since the 1960s ended. Surely this is one of the *nastiest* science fiction novels published since Brian Kirby's Essex House line folded.

Set in Southern California in the intermediate future, *Dr. Adder* is the story of the conflict between John Mox, Orange County media preacher, castrated in a peculiarly ghastly and perverse fashion by the good doctor of the title, and Dr. Adder, who performs sexual cosmetic surgery on aspiring whores in order to fit them for their careers in terms of the hidden sexual fixations he uncovers in their customers. These alterations involve amputations, and genitalic transformations far too hideous to detail in this, or probably any other, magazine. Adder is the *hero* insofar as there is any.

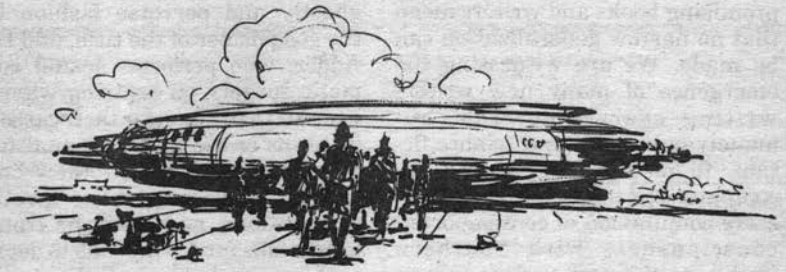
This book is foul. It is brilliantly written. One feels empathy for characters that would no doubt send one fleeing in terror and loathing were they to be encountered in real life.

The main viewpoint character (not Dr. Adder) begins the novel as the proprietor of a bordello in which the clientele enjoys congress with mutated chickens, and things progress from there. Yet you come to understand and feel for these people. Jeter writes like an inspired combination of Philip K. Dick (who wrote an afterward), William Burroughs, and Michael Perkins.

In the 1960s, this novel probably would have had little trouble finding a publisher. But poor Jeter was at the same time ahead of the field and behind it at the dawn of the 1970s. His career sat on hold for a decade until, at last, in 1984, that most numerologically significant of all years in the 20th century SF calendar, his time came round at last, and Jim Frenkel of Blue Jay

Books summoned up the bad taste and good sense to finally publish it.

If there really is a discontinuity between the science fiction of the 1970s and the new generation of the 1980s, somehow the publication of this refugee from the 1960s ten years and more later in the Year of Our Lord 1984 seems to say it all. ●



MARTIN GARDNER (From page 62)

SECOND SOLUTION TO THE BARBERS OF BARBERPOLIA

If you think about it long enough you should be able to see that if A does a certain amount of work in A minutes, and B does the same amount of work in B minutes, then the formula for x, the time it takes the two to do the job together, is:

$$\frac{1}{x} = \frac{1}{A} + \frac{1}{B}$$

Applying the formula to our problem gives an answer of 6 and 2/3 minutes. Many people, without much thought, guess 15 minutes!

The formula has endless applications. Here are five:

1. If one man can mow a lawn in A units of time, and another can mow it in B units of time, the formula gives the time (x) it will take when both mow the lawn together.

2. If one faucet will fill a tank in A units of time, and another faucet will fill the same tank in B units of time, then x is the time it will take to fill the tank when both faucets are running.

3. Two soap bubbles of radii A and B will coalesce to form a larger bubble of radius x.

4. If A is the distance of an object from a lens, and B is the distance of the image from the lens, x is the lens's focal length.

5. If two electrical resistors are in parallel, with resistances A and B, the total resistance is x.

Engineers and physicists know of many other examples of how this ridiculously simple formula applies to various aspects of the physical world.

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

The holiday lull in con(vention) activity gives us a chance to look ahead to the Winter's cons. Make plans now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 (long) envelope) at 9850 Fairfax Sq. #232, Fairfax VA 22031. (703) 273-6111 is the hot line. If a machine answers, leave your area code & number. I'll call back on my nickel. Send cons an SASE when writing. When calling cons, give your name & reason for calling first off. Look for me at cons as Filthy Pierre.

OCTOBER, 1984

26-28—**RoVaCon.** For info, write: Box 117, Salem VA 24153. Or phone: (703) 389-9400 (10 am to 10 pm only, not collect). Con will be held in: Roanoke VA (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Civic Center. Guests will include: Jo (Diadem) Clayton, R. (Elfquest) Pini, K. Freas, M. A. Foster.

26-28—**NovaCon.** Treadway Resort, Lancaster PA. J. O. Jeppson (Mrs. Isaac Asimov), Sucharitkul.

26-28—**ICon.** Abbey Inn, Iowa City IA. Dean Ing, Wilson Arthur (Bob) Tucker. Call hotel for info.

NOVEMBER, 1984

2-4—**NecronomiCon. (813)677-2881** Holiday Inn Downtown, Tampa FL. Andre Norton, L. Niven.

2-4—**ConCentric.** Tiger Hotel, Columbia MO. Paul O. Williams. Don't confuse this with con below.

9-11—**ConCentric.** Sheraton 500, Vancouver BC. Lari Davidson. Don't confuse this with con above.

9-11—**TzarKon, 1040 S. McKnight Rd., Richmond Hts. MO 63117.** St. Louis MO. No more info on this.

9-11—**SciCon, Box 9434, Hampton VA 23670** Karl Edward Wagner, Phil Foglio, Somtow (Aquila) Sucharitkul, Polly & Kelly Freas, John & Dorsey Flynn, Allen Wold, Colleen Doran, Kay Reynolds, Masquerade.

16-18—**PhilCon, Box 8303, Philadelphia PA 19101.** Larry Niven, artist Sean Spacher. Since 1936.

23-25—**LosCon, 11513 Burbank Blvd., N. Hollywood CA 91601.** Pasadena CA. Curt Siodmak, Forrest J. Ackerman, Bill Warren. The traditional, annual LA-area con. About a thousand fans are expected.

DECEMBER, 1984

7-9—**WindyCon, Box 432, Chicago IL 60690.** Schaumburg, IL. Alan Dean Foster, A. J. Budrys, Gene Wolfe, W. A. (Bob) Tucker, P. Eisenstein, Joan H. Woods. The annual, traditional Chicago-area con.

JANUARY, 1985

18-2 —**RustyCon, Box 47132, Seattle WA 98146.** Gordon Eklund, Kevin Johnson, Steve Fahnestalk.

AUGUST, 1985

22-26—**AussieCon Two, 11863 W. Jefferson Blvd. #1, Culver City CA 90230.** Melbourne, Australia. The WorldCon for 1985. Gene (New Sun) Wolfe, editor/fan Ted White. Join for $50 to the end of 1984.

30-Sep. 2—**ChiliCon, Box 9612, Austin TX 78766.** The North American SF Interim Con for 1985 (NASFIC's are held only in years when WorldCon is outside North America). 3000 fans expected.

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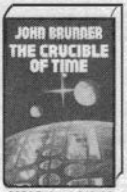

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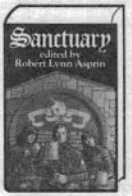

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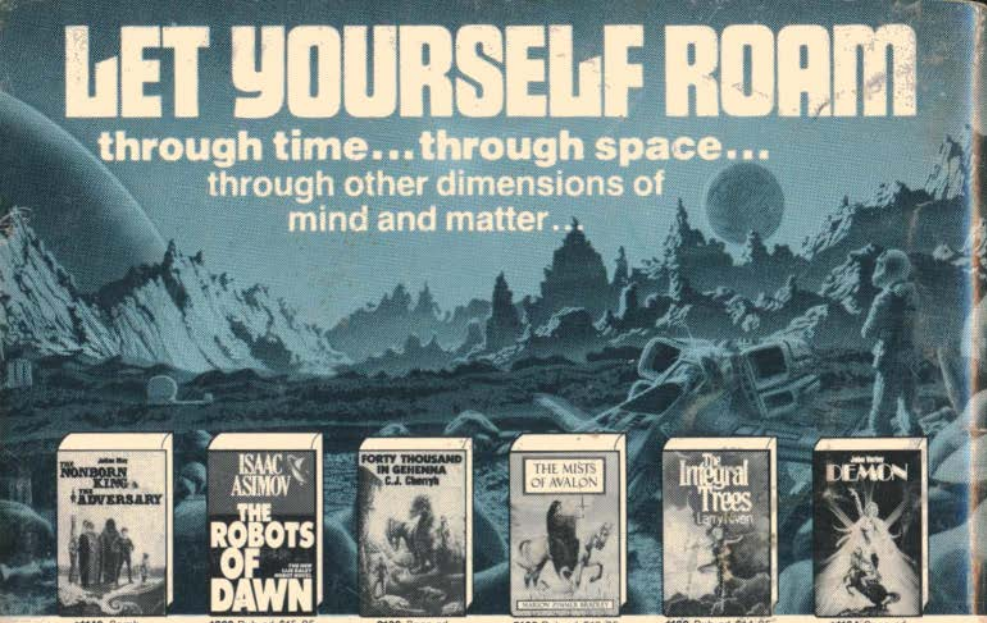

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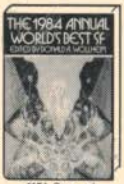

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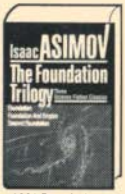

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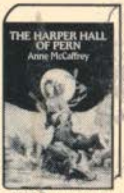

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