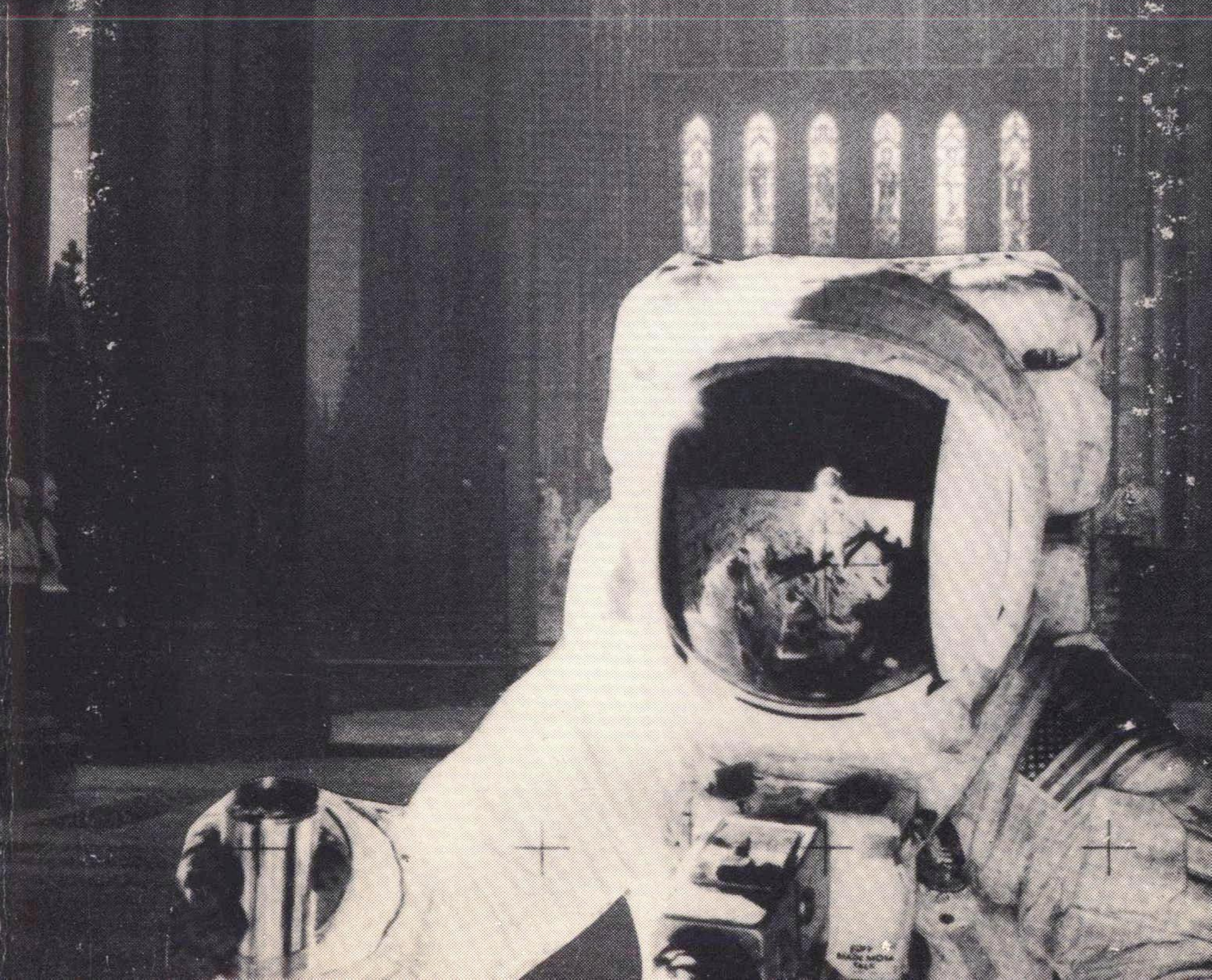
LAST WAVE

THE LAST BEST HOPE OF SPECULATIVE FICTION

WINTER 1986 $3.00 Number Five



LAST WAVE

Winter 1986 Volume One Number Five

LAST WAVE Volume 1, Number 5, Winter 1986 is published and edited by Scott Edelman. Editorial and subscription address is Last Wave, Post Office Box 3022, Saxonville Station, Framingham, Massachusetts 01701. Subscription rate is ten dollars for four issues in the United States and Canada, thirteen dollars elsewhere. Issues one through four are still available at $2.50 each. All submissions must be accompanied by a stamped self-addressed envelope. All correspondence is considered to be for publication unless specifically marked otherwise. Front cover by Richard Kadrey. Printed by Apollo Books, Winona, Minnesota.

BACK ISSUES/SUBSCRIPTIONS

LAST WAVE #1: Fiction by Steve Rasnic Tem, Avram Davidson, Thomas M. Disch, Jessica Amanda Salmonson and John Sladek. Poetry by Philip K. Kick. Essay by Kirsten Nelson. **$2.50.**

LAST WAVE #2: Fiction by Ian Watson, Ronald Anthony Cross, Carter Scholz, and Rachel Pollack. Poetry by Gene van Troyer, Robert Frazier, Andrew Joron, and Kathy Rantala. Opera libretto to Thomas M. Disch's "Frankenstein." **$2.50.**

LAST WAVE #3: Fiction by Felix C. Gotschalk, Jessica Amanda Salmonson, Steve Rasnic Tem, David J. Sheskin and Mark Williams. Play by Parke Godwin. Poetry by Philip K. Dick. Essay by K. W. Jetter. **$2.50.**

LAST WAVE #4: Fiction by Richard Wilson, Ronald Anthony Cross, Ian Watson, and David R. Bunch. **$2.50.**

LAST WAVE #5: Additional copies of this issue. **$3.00.**

LAST WAVE #6: Fiction by Richard Singer, Jessica Amanda Salmonson, Ronald Anthony Cross, David R. Bunch, Paul Di Filippo, and Rachel Pollack, plus Felix Gotschalk's five act play, "Oedipus Becomes Electra." Subscriptions may be started with this issue at $10.00 for four issues.

Please send me copies of the following issues of *Last Wave*:

1 2 3 4 5

In addition, please start a subscription to *Last Wave* beginning with Issue 6. I enclose $____ total.

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Return coupon to *Last Wave*, P.O. Box 3022, Saxonville Station, Framingham, MA 01701.

WHAT KILLS SCIENCE FICTION

I shouldn't have to publish *Last Wave*. You shouldn't have to purchase it. All of the stories and poems I've published so far should have appeared in more important magazines, should have garnered the authors more money, should have won themselves a larger audience. Instead of having to winnow them out of my slush-pile, I should have been able to read these stories in *Fantasy and Science Fiction* or *Omni*.

Jessica Amanda Salmonson's "Time-Slit Through a Rice Paper Window" (*Last Wave* #3), which I consider the finest story I've published and one of the finest stories published all last year, was rejected by a dozen major markets before it was submitted to me, and I fell in love with it. That chain of events should not have had to pass before the story was set before your eyes.

The fact that *Last Wave* has to exist at all as a separate, independent entity, as a conduit for this sort of ambitious, unformularized story to reach the public, is an indication that mainstream science fiction just *does not work*.

There are myths which have to be killed quickly, or they will consume us all. I will write about others at length in the future, but for the moment I'd like to confine myself to the ludicrous myth of science fiction as family. It has surfaced most recently in David Hartwell's *Age of Wonders: Exploring the World of Science Fiction* (Walker and Company, ISBN 0-8027-0808-0 $15.95), a book which has turned out to be much closer in spirit to Lester Del Rey's cranky *Science Fiction: 1926-1976* than to Samuel Delaney's brilliant *Jewel-Hinged Jaw* exegeses. This has greatly surprised me, considering the source.

One example:

Hartwell writes glowingly of the peace and understanding which exists between all aspects of the fan world. Remarkably, he refers to the phenomenon of Star Trek fandom somehow managing to avoid ever mentioning that "Trekkie" is not a term of endearment, but instead one of disparagement. All fandoms, he claims, are blissfully tolerant of each other's idiosyncracies. We all know that to be false, and as I read I was astonished by the author's naivete. I respect Mr. Hartwell too much to blame this error on ignorance. Speaking from personal observation, I can honestly say that there hasn't been a single science fiction convention in the last ten years at which I have not seen at least one incident of teenaged boys jeering at the carefully applied Spock ears on some passing prepubescent. We all know that tensions of this sort exist, and though we all might have wished for less boorish behavior in these particular cases—why the urge to pretend that such events do not occur?

We are always told to don blinders to the truth. Why must we kowtow to those who would forbid the enforcement of standards or even the making of simple comparisons because it would bruise egos, because it would give lie to this old myth of family?

Coke tut-tuts Pepsi; McDonald's scolds Burger King. Are we such delicate creatures that the field would wither under a comparative eye? Must we avoid competitive advertising for fear of somehow seeming nasty? In my first ads for *Last Wave* , which appeared in the August 1983 issue of *Locus*, I presented to you a list of science fiction authors you would not be seeing in *Last Wave*. My second ad was headlined, "Look at it this way. *Again, Dangerous Visions* may have been *The Last Dangerous Visions*." My most recent ad asks the question, "Have you ever noticed that *Amazing* ...isn't?" A great number of people have been shocked by this approach. How *dare* I even intimate that some writers are more equal than others.

To be frank, though, it is these people with their lack of critical standards (or rather, in most instances, lack of a desire to publicly acknowledge the standards which they know exist) who are hampering the field. Science fiction is full of its own Judith Krantzs and Sidney Sheldons. Must we, out of some ill-conceived etiquette, tolerate them in silence? Does the act of getting books published grant the authors a status that means we must speak in hushed voices

of even the most hackish of them, as if appearing between covers on a rotating rack elevated one to godhood? Are all endeavors, whether worthy or not, deserving of the same applause? Is there no one who will stand up for the principle that it can be a good thing at times to say that the Emperor has no clothes?

Can you picture what would occur if the larger world of letters was forced to ape the tactics of the Pollyannas of science fiction? Italo Calvino would be made to write paens of praise to Jackie Collins. William Kennedy would be thought rude if he refused to co-chair panel discussions with Rosemary Rogers on the future of the novel. *The Paris Review* would be thought remiss if it did not publish interviews with the likes of Arthur Hailey. Sound ridiculous? Of course. But sad to say it is a perfect description, although with different names, of the current world of science fiction.

Why must we pretend that a critic must wear a perpetual smile? To ignore the fact that some writers are doing more important things than others is to belittle those who struggle to do their best. Yet we are constantly being asked to collude in a cruel literary hoax which if we give in will destroy our critical sense. I beg you to refuse to be a part of it.

So please don't chastise me for causing embarassment each time I point at a naked emperor. The science fiction field should be too important to all of us to ally ourselves with those who would help destroy it with lies and silence.

—Scott Edelman

000-00-0000

by Michael Bishop

000-00-000

ABSOLUTE ZERO: You have entered a small auditorium or theater to see an animated documentary of the history of place holders in the affairs of the human species. I am your narrator. I have no name, but my voice identifies me as female. At present, of course, you find yourself staring at a blank or blackened screen and listening to the unemotional cadences of my voice-over. Experimental films, whether live-action or animated, have never particularly interested you—the third game of this year's World Series is being broadcast tonight on commercial television—but someone with affectedly modish tastes and an irresistibly bullying manner prevailed upon you to come, and so here you are, your sole consolation the absence of a line at the ticket counter and hence the lack of any need to function as a place holder in an annoying queue. Still, the house is three quarters empty, and the loud garrulity of your companion has made you shrink into yourself like a sick man's penis. You slump down so far in your seat that no one but those in immediately adjacent rows can see you. The strain of this posture induces you to remember that yesterday you obtained a replacement for a lost Social Security card and that a computer error gave you the disquieting number 000-00-0000. Moreover, it frightens you that the

film you are about to watch—if ever a visual image breaks in upon the screen's blindness—has no title.

> "*zero, absolute:* lowest temperature point that is theoretically possible: 0° Kelvin, -273.2° Centigrade or -459.8° Fahrenheit; the point has been very closely approached, but cannot be attained in experiments." Siegfried Mandel, *Dictionary of Science* (New York: Dell, 3rd printing, 1972), p. 365.

000-00-0000

"ZERO AT THE BONE": This caption dawns at the bottom of the screen, beneath a flash-frozen flood of spectacularly cold light. A glacier of empearled lambency. You begin to believe that either on the Centigrade or the Fahrenheit scale, absolute zero has been attained. Two weeks into October and the operators of this theater are cavalierly running the air conditioning at topmost tilt. This frightens you, too. You begin to shiver, but have no strength to stand and stalk out. Zero at the bone. Where have you heard *that* before? A literary allusion, isn't it? But who first said it? Nobody. Nobody that you can remember, and with your vitated will and your brand-new, identity-mocking Social Security card, you're nobody, too. Take heart, Mr. 000-00-0000. Even yet, you are more than I, for I am as fearfully close to a nonentity as anyone could ever be. You hold your place in the clammy flesh, but I mine only at the sufferance of the anonymous animators who sponsored this project and only as a voice. I have no Social Security number at all. I am probably of a completely different nationality. French, maybe, or Japanese. *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*. (Does my accent identify me?) I have attained 0° Kelvin on the scale of my own self-esteem and hence have reached absolute zero in an absolute personal sense. Only my task as narrator preserves me from total nullity. Aught that I am, I ought not

to exist in any guise, even a scratchy vocal one. It scares me, 000-00-0000.

> "*zero* an insignificant person; a dull nobody. For synonyms see OAF (U.S. slang, mid 1900s-pres.)." Richard Spears, *Slang and Euphemism: A Dictionary of Oaths, Curses, Insults, Racial Slurs, Sexual Slang and Metaphor, Drug Talk, Homosexual Lingo, and Related Matters,* Abridged Edition (New York: Signet, 1982), pp. 448.

000-00-0000

"A LONG TIME AGO, THE HUMAN SPECIES DIDN'T KNOW NOTHING": Everything that you have heard me say to this point, *only* you have heard. It all represents a kind of inadmissable prologue that I have laid down solely to establish a connection between us. "A long time ago, the human species didn't know nothing." There. That voice-over narrative hook, as coyly inelegant as it may be, begins the sound track proper—just an instant or two after your eyes have registered the two-dimensional snowfield captioned "zero at the bone." Bones are often fossils, and fossils take us back to the beginning. Or near it.

> NARRATOR: A long time ago, the human species didn't know nothing. By which we mean to report that although early human civilizations were far from mathematically illiterate (else how could they have practiced astronomy or built the pyramids?), the concept of zero, today such a commonplace that even kindergarteners comprehend it, eluded discovery for centuries. Addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division all went forward without benefit of the empty-headed symbol that Einstein himself once referred to as a "goose egg." So did

> score-keeping in such popular diversions as gladitorial combat and roc-potting. Indeed, until the advent of the symbol itself, mathematicians—and, yes, royal scorekeepers—were forced to acknowledge this troublesome nonesuch by leaving strategic gaps in their rows of figures. Blathermore and blah-forth, blah blah blah blah blah

On the screen, my dear 000-00-0000, a montage of Leonardo da Vinci-ish sketches—animated, of course—depicting all the historical tidbits I continue to rehearse verbally for you and your seatmates. But I've gone under like this (again) to address you (once more) on a subliminal level because *they* are NOTHING to me. What I say for your ears only, Mister Nowhere Man, must therefore lift you from the status of theater-going cipher to (at least) that of marginal entity, even if I myself remain only a place holder in the emptiness of your soul.

> "Although there are only nine counters in each row of the abacus, there are actually ten possible arrangements. Besides using any number of counters from one to nine in a row, it is also possible to use *no* counter—that is, to leave the place at the counting position empty. This escaped all the great Greek mathematicians and was not recognized until the ninth century, when some unnamed Hindu thought of representing the tenth alternative by a special symbol, which the Arabs called 'sifr' ('empty') and which has come down to us, in consequence, as 'cipher' or, in more corrupt form, 'zero.'" *Asimov's Guide to Science* (New York: Basic Books, 1972), p. 876.

000-00-0000

A FUNNY THING HAPPENED TO ME ON THE WAY TO THE VACUUM : Your companion has fallen asleep in his seat. An animated documentary on the topic of mathematical place holders has turned out to be not at all to his taste. Buffoonishly, in outright competition with my voice-over, he snores as loudly as earlier he talked. (*You* wish that in the torn upholstered theater-chair next to you reposed only a gap.) Even though the actor Zero Mostel is dead, your companion looks like a poignantly weary Zero Mostel, his jowls wagging, his projector-illuminated lips puffing with each crass expulsion of breath. Too bad for him. At this point, the film is almost amusing. The animators have conjured a colorful promenade of cartoonish figures who have borne the unfortunate forename Zero, including the actor whom your companion resembles, a Greek philosopher whose writings on various metaphysical matters were lost forever in the fire at Alexandria, a buck-toothed character in the comic strip *Beetle Bailey* , and a certain JS ("The Unknown Citizen"), whose first name might as well have been Zero, because although there was no official complaint against him, the government has recently issued him a Social Security card bearing upon it the cipher-laden series 000-00-0000. The animators have rendered this last archetypal figure without a face. Helplessly, you put your hands to your not ill-sculpted features to see if they are still there.

> "It's a joy to see Messrs. Mostel, Silvers, and Gilford romping through this farce, and it reminds us again of the unfortunate way in which the movies have neglected and wasted the enormous talents of these three comics. Mostel is much more than a comic—he is, simply, one of the very greatest actors alive." Steven H. Scheur, ed., *Movies on TV: 1978-79 Edition* (New York: Bantam Books, Eighth (revised) edition, 6th printing), p. 261.

But, of course, he *isn't* alive anymore. Neither are most of the unsung human beings who survived well into this century, many with considerably more auspicious forenames than Zero.

000-00-000

ZERO DRIFT: More snow, more instructive cartoons. You note the absence of a comforting lump under the outer edge of your left buttock and realize that your billfold is gone. A battered wallet with plastic inserts for credit cards and family photographs. You actually employ only a few of these transparent envelopes. (A K-Mart photo-booth mug shot of your father, fifteen years old, is precious to you, but the only paternal feature that you can recall with any degree of certainty has its proper home in the 1950s, i.e., the man's graying, military-style crewcut.) One such plastic insert *does* contain your Social Security card, and the loss of that piece of official identification truly frets you, deflecting your attention from both the film and your companion's snoring. Did your wallet slip from your back pocket and fall to the floor? A clumsy search in the dark finds nothing to support this hypothesis—unless the person behind you has already picked it up and hidden it in his or her clothes. Or maybe your pocket was picked by one of the unwashed attendees milling about in the lobby before the houselights went down. If so, the thief has acquired 1) only a dollar or two, 2) a homogenized likeness of your father, who either died in the recent past or else joined the brainwashed minions of a charismatic religious sectarian, and 3) tentative control of the nine zeros on your Social Security card. You imagine the thief doing everything in his power to divest himself of this fearful numerological curse, planting the card on some unsuspecting stooge, who, upon discovering it, either drops it in a tempting spot in a public place or else surreptitiously passes it on to yet another anonymous victim. You imagine this cycle continuing until every person in the world has briefly experienced the private celebrity of administrative extinction.

"*zero drift* n: a gradual change in the scale zero of a measuring instrument (as a thermometer or a galvanometer)." *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* (G. & C. Merriam Co., 1976), vol. III, p. 2658.

WEIGHTLESSNESS: The narrator of this untitled film weighs even less than I do. She has only her voice to project into the void. And weightlessness, of course, occurs automatically in environments possessing—either naturally or artificially—the "negative" attribute of ZERO GRAVITY. Like absolute zero, zero gravity is difficult to attain in the everyday operation of the world. The narrator of this "animated documentary," for instance, sounds inordinately serious about my coerced attendance tonight, the loss of my wallet, and the (falsely) ominous misassignment to me of a nine-digit Social Security number whose digits are in fact ciphers or place holders. Objectively speaking, clinically speaking, we are *all* place holders, but the subjective dimension has the power to redeem us from the anonymity of vast perspectives and the omnipotent long view. I am chuckling sardonically to myself as I scrunch here, and I would urge the faceless woman upon whose heavy subvocalizations I have been involuntarily eavesdropping ever since the projector began to purr, "Lighten up." My friend Zero Mostel—*not his real name*—has already pronounced judgement on the film makers' ponderous approach to their subject matter, and I would wake him up and suggest going home except that I would rather endure his snoring than his inevitable angry response to any tactless hint that he may have been sleeping.

> "*zero-sum game* n: a game in which the
> cumulative winnings equal the cumulative losses"
> *Ibid.*

"NOTHING CAN BE CREATED OUT OF NOTHING."—LUCRETIUS: And you of course compound the denial of my reality by speaking around me to an unidentified second-person auditor as if I were not even here. Look at the caption on the screen, 000-00-0000, the one from Lucretius, and let me inform you that I have not misread your unspoken anxiety and that your flippant response to my compassionate intrusions—for I have addressed you *by name* each time I've undercut my own narration to talk to you—qualifies as a self-defense mechanism. I have not manufactured my analysis in the absence of facts, I have NOT made something from nothing.

> "Recent discoveries in particle physics have suggested mechanisms whereby matter can be created in empty space by the cosmic gravitational field, which only leaves the origin of spacetime itself as a mystery....We have seen how the quantum factor permits events to occur without causes in the subatomic world. Particles, for example, can appear out of nowhere without specific causation....Thus, spacetime could pop out of nothingness as the result of a causeless quantum transition." Paul Davies, *God and the New Physics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), pp. 214-215.

000-00-0000

I THINK I'M TURNING JAPANESE: Handbooks on proper English usage tell us that the plural of the word *zero* may be either *zeros* or *zeroes*. Both before and during the years of World War II, the Japanese built 10,937 "Zeroes" (or "Zeros"). This was an aircraft properly called the Mitsubishi A6M, a single-seat fighter famous for its use by the Japanese Navy in *kamikaze* assaults on U.S. vessels in the Pacific. The pilots of the notorious Zeros (or Zeroes) dive-bombed their explosives-filled airplanes into American

carriers, destroyers, and troop ships, sacrificing their own lives for the sake of the embattled homeland. Perhaps the Mitsubishi A6M became known as the Zero because its kamikaze pilots were expendable ciphers in the Japanese war effort, persons of no individual consequence, nobodies. This is certainly what they became, physically, at the moment of sacrifical impact, but as a transplanted countrywoman of these fallen heroes (rarely, if ever, *heros*), I must point out that they also attained the absolute zero of apotheosis in their own native religio-metaphysical faith. Nobodies became somebodies—if only briefly—through violent self-negation, subtracting their Zeros (or Zeroes) from the sum total of the Divine Wind. A zero-sum game of existential profundity, played for keeps. Everyone is temporarily a celebrity in death, and the victim of violent self-sacrifice even moreso. This is an amusing paradox that I tell you, 000-00-0000, to offset the gravity of my public narration.

> "I remember not so long ago being in the Imperial War Museum where they have the front section of a *Zero* fighter cut through the cockpit. One can actually stand looking into the cockpit. And one can see what's actually underneath the plane; looking up into the interior, one can see every rivet. An enormous sort of tragic poetry surrounds that plane in the Imperial War Museum. One can see all those Japanese men at work; women in their factories in some Tokyo suburb stamping the rivets into this particular plane. One can imagine the plane later on a carrier in the Pacific...." J.G. Ballard, "Interview with JGB by Graeme Revell," *Re/Search*, No. 8-9, 1984, p. 47.

Uncertain of my age, maybe *I* am one of those women. Maybe I am the *daughter* of one of those women.

000-00-0000

ZERO VISIBILITY: But individuating myself in this way, in an aesthetic experience predicated on the abstract universality of its components, has terrified you, hasn't it? You have no desire to know the crass autobiographical details of my background, such gross distinguishing factors as my parents' nationality, the fortuitously erotic placement of a birthmark I can only dimly remember, the psychic scars of past rejections. You don't want to see me stamping rivets into an airplane. And you don't want to hear me plaintively confess the ways in which I abased myself for a man who knocked me up and then vanished from my life as thoroughly as if someone has dismembered his body and then cleverly disposed of the pieces. (I had an abortion). You prefer knowing me as a script-bound voice. You don't want to see me at all. You *can't* see me. Of course, the limits on your ability to visualize me derive from the homeopathic nature of your own self-defining anxieties.

See *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, vol. III, p. 2657, for details.

000-00-0000

DISINTEGRATION < ZERO HOUR > EVOLUTION: Has my analysis annihilated you? The projector continues to purr, but the preternatural fixity of your eyeballs suggests a kind of defensive catatonia. Maybe I can knock down your irrational defenses with tenderness.

NARRATOR: Lorenz Oken, a German philosopher and biologist, had the bent of a Pythogorean mystic. He believed that reality couches itself in a variety of mathematical symbols. According to Oken, zero is simultaneously nothingness and infinity. Positive and negative numbers issue from zero in opposite

directions, and this process parallels the descending and ascending order of animate and inanimate objects in our natural world. Oken also held that, metaphysically speaking, zero is God and that the decay of matter to "mucus" and the ascent of living creatures toward higher and higher levels of self-awareness reveal God's wish to embody himself in nature. This philosophy, so attractive to American Transcendentalists, has a tacit counterpart in that of the kamikaze pilots who killed themselves for the state. It is not so bad to be Nothing. Sometimes, in fact, it is everything. If zero is God, and if our entire cosmos arose spontaneously from nothing, think for a moment on the vast *potential* of a single person's self-conscious anonymity.

The number 000-00-0000, you see, permits legimitate interpretation as nine place holders awaiting the substitution of weightier counters. Hiroshima, mon amour, need not haunt us *forever*.

"*love* n...7: a score of zero in tennis and some other games: NOTHING" *Webster's*, vol. II, p. 1340. (Probably from the French *l'oeuf*, the egg, because of the zero's resemblance to a goose egg when the score is recorded on a chalk board or a slate visible to the contestants or the spectators at a tennis match.)

"*zero hour* n: compare H HOUR, COUNTDOWN, CRISIS, and DAY OF RECKONING" *Webster's*, vol. III, p. 2658 (semifaulty citation).

"*zero population growth:* a short-term consequence of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, a long-term consequence of the death of love. (Game, match, set)" Richard Bowers, Paul Erlich, and Charles Remington. *A Latter-Day Devil's Dictionary*. (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1969), p. 191.

GROUND ZERO: And so of course we come down to this. We zeroize—or, rather, *you* zeroize—the seeming impossibility of a relationship between us by projecting my whispered appeals into the intangible narration of an artsy-fartsy film or by dismissing them as the grating rhonchus of a male companion who forced your attendance at this comily hip event. But I am *not* invisible, I am *not* merely a voice emanating in matter-of-fact nuances from the speakers in this converted chemistry auditorium, and I am most definitely *not* a buffoonish double for someone resembling the late Zero Mostel. That that unfeeling person—the place holding separating us—knocked me up I can't deny, and that I am the nisei offspring of immigrant parents I have never done anything to hide from you. Look at me. How could I? And so we sit here side by side an ocean apart—the Pacific, presumably—suffering the chill of the air conditioning and the absolute zero at the bone of our fears of and for the other. The emphatic details of my identity obliterate you. They wipe you out. It is not your wallet that you have lost but your way through the labyrinth of my intimidating personal history. You have forgotten, if you ever knew, that "except for zero itself, every number raised to the zero power is defined as equal to 1." (That is what we could have been.) Or maybe the comic misassignment to you of Social Security card 000-00-0000 is no misassignment at all. Maybe, in this single mordant instance, the state has not erred. It has atomized you as you have atomized me, but by impersonal chance rather than by deliberate choice. Which is why it is astonishing that either of us should continue to hurt.

Look, 000-00-0000, the lights are coming up.

000-00-000

Supreme Court Decisions

BY DAVID J. SHESKIN

Oscar Mosco was my old football coach. He'd always had this thing about rolling up incredibly high scores against weak teams. He'd stand on the sidelines yelling obscenities at the opposing players and anytime one of them happened to get tossed out of bounds near our bench he'd kick them with his heavy boots or grind his stubby fingers in their eyes.

Mr. Oscar Mosco inspired me and the other boys to fifty consecutive victories in the Texas Star League. In the community he was both a spiritual as well as a physical leader. His wife Molly, an obese and outspoken woman with an incredibly good looking face, owned and operated a small store which specialized in selling salmon colored lingerie. Mr. and Mrs. Oscar Mosco were the southwest regional (national district 7) Chinese checkers champions. Most people conceded that the Moscos had cheated in order to win all their titles, but few cared.

Oscar Mosco gave away my bride. Many times before I married his daughter he'd jabbed me in the ribs and said, "She looks like a real good lay to me sonny." She was. She was an angel in salmon colored lingerie.

Mr. Mosco liked me. This was mainly because I won a lot of football games for him. I was also an extremely dirty player. Since I rejected the ethic of good sportsmanship I was Oscar's pride and joy. So, in my salmon and pink uniform I led Oscar's team all over Texas, whipping schools supported by Texas Baptists, Texas Methodists, and other breeds of Texas Christianity. Oscar Mosco had this thing about organized Texas religion. More than once I'd caught him making obscene phone calls to clergymen.

Oscar Mosco was not a popular man. I don't believe his family even liked him. The thing about Mr. Mosco that made people want to stay around him was that he was a winner. He won at everything he tried. He cheated a lot. He found ways to play dirty in games that had been especially designed so as to make playing dirty impossible. For a while he toured America as the representative of a famous gaming company. They sent him all over the country with 150 competitive games they'd developed. His job was to popularize the games by challenging people of prominence to public matches. He relished backing prominent men into insoluble dilemmas or of accusing them of being cheats. Women he didn't have to humiliate. He'd promise them huge caches of salmon colored undergarments if they would throw the game in his direction. So he won. He became something of a national hero until a deranged barber in Laredo mailed enough documentation to the Chicago Tribune and the New York Times to convince these periodicals to run a page one story regarding the fact that Mr. Oscar Mosco couldn't win at anything unless he was wearing matching salmon colored panties and a brassiere underneath it all.

Well, the gist of all this is that my wife Mary Frances Mosco Dolly was a wonderful girl. She was an intelligent, open-minded, beautiful, faithful, and loving woman. By her twenty-eighth year, the mother of my children had long since thrown away all of her salmon colored underthings. She usually pranced about with nothing on underneath. When forced into more modest dress, Mary Frances leaned toward the darker end of the spectrum.

One day my wife asked me if her father, recently widowed, could come to live with us. I was reluctant. This was because I had changed since my high school days. I had become the head football coach at Notre Dame University and national president of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. A year before I'd had the good fortune to personally receive the Papal blessing at the Vatican. Over my bed hung an autographed picture of his Holiness handing a football off to me.

"I have this feeling, Mary Frances, that if your daddy comes to live with us we will lose our foothold in the community."

"Pappa's an old man. He's past the age where he can cause big trouble."

"I have this feeling, Mary Frances, that if your daddy comes to live with us his anti-religious sentiments will disrupt the rhythm of our daily lives."

"He's an old man with nowhere to go. I'm his only child. And you mustn't forget that he was your old football coach. He made a star out of you."

"I don't think you are qualified to speculate about my football prowess. In point of fact, Mary Frances, I'd have been a fine football player at any school."

"All right! He's my father though. Somehow we must do right by him."

"I agree. Why not send him to a home?"

The wife and I argued about what should be done with Oscar Mosco for three days. On the fourth day the problem took care of itself. Mr. Mosco was appointed by the Senate of the United States as a non-sectarian chaplain. Mary Frances convinced me it was only proper that we go to Washington and be present at his inaugural sermon.

Was this the same man I'd once known? He was still a gruff looking man, sloppily dressed, his pockets stuffed with marbles especially cut for the Chinese checkerboard.

"It's good to see you again, Mr. Mosco."

He didn't want to talk with me. He only eyed me warily, giving extra consideration to the religious and fraternal pins which decorated my lapels. Oscar Mosco then cornered the President of the United States and said, "Why I ever let my daughter marry that homosexual I'll never know."

I had to concede that Oscar had mellowed with age. Fifteen years ago, President or no President, he'd have called me a queer. Of course I replied.

"Mr. President, I am the football coach at Notre Dame University. I am the President of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. I was your personal envoy to the Olympics, and last month you asked me to head your physical fitness program. I must emphatically deny being or ever having been a homosexual. I'm afraid my father-in-law is getting a bit eccentric in his old age."

That night the President of the United States went on national television. As he put it:

"Fellow Americans, tonight I have to discuss with you a topic of grave concern. This is an age of hard times filled with war and poverty. But in our midst is an even greater threat. Sometimes the most erudite of us are misled. We are often deceived by appearances and as a result of this, sometimes, though not very often, the wrong man attains a position of prominence. With a heavy heart, I must report that this afternoon on the floor of the United States Senate the new chaplain, the honorable Mr. Oscar Mosco, informed me that Dickey Dolly, a man whose prominence in national athletics is well known, is a homosexual. During the past few hours my staff has worked without thought of rest in order that we might, one way or the other, clarify this grave charge. At exactly 8:27 this evening the evidence became conclusive. Clearly, Mr. Dolly is a homosexual of the worst sort. I feel ashamed to admit that I have spent many a relaxed evening both arm and finger wrestling with this man. Ironically it was Chaplain Mosco, Mr. Dolly's father-in-law, who related to me numerous anecdotes dating back to Mr. Dolly's grade school days which clearly document the development of his homosexual tendencies. In addition to this, Chaplain Mosco outlined some of the consequences of Mr. Dolly's abberation in his adult life. As the President I feel it is my responsibility to bring to the attention of the people of this great nation what nature of a man Mr. Dickey Dolly is. It is my hope that the frank and open handling of this issue will once and for all silence those critics who claim that a credibility gap exists within this administration. It is my belief that you the people will deal with Mr. Dolly as he deserves to be dealt with, and in view of this I leave this grave matter in your hands, and thus do not plan any legislative or legal action against him.

"Fortunately, I am able to end this address on a more congenial note. I have authorized Chaplain Mosco to organize a Chinese checkers tournament in which all three branches of the government will participate. Perhaps such a diversion is just the medicine this nation needs to see us through the grim events of the past day."

The wife was upset. So was I. To begin with, my first name was Danny.

"It is a sad commentary on the executive branch of the government when its leader is derelict in the use of a man's first

name. I will not permit this vindictive action which you have initiated ruin my career nor will I permit it to disrupt my family life."

The President never acknowledged this brief note.

Loyal friends advised me that my only hope was to convince the nation of my heterosexuality through the courts. The folks at Notre Dame were upset. In spite of this they recognized the fact that I had led their football team to forty-six consecutive wins and only needed three more to break the national record. In view of this, the alumni association reluctantly drafted a statement that they'd rather win with a queer coach than lose with a ladies man. A telegram from the President of the university suggested that if, perhaps, I could convince people I was straight the university could extend my contract for a few more seasons.

I called up this portrait photographer. His name was Grubacher. A few years back he'd taken wedding pictures of the wife and me. I said, "Grubacher, I want you to take pictures of me copulating with my wife." His spirits seemed to rise immediately. He suggested, "Mr. Dolly, if I might offer a suggestion. I've always found that couples cherish poses of themselves involved in fellatio and cunnilingus." This man Grubacher was in the Fellowship of Christian Photographers. I really hadn't imagined he'd been asked to do this sort of thing previously. "Really, Grubacher, I don't think that would be prudent. I only want pictures of the Mrs. and me copulating. Missionary position only. No fancy underthings in sight."

Grubacher was agreeable enough. He came over one afternoon with his Hasselblad and his lights. Shot thirty-six exposures, using various speeds, varied the density and the composition of the negatives to produce the most aesthetic effects. We finally agreed on three shots—one of the wife and me necking on the kitchen table; one of the wife masturbating me in the fireplace; and one of the wife and me copulating on a large mushroom (purposely blurred so as to accentuate the accelerated pelvic thrusts). Armed with poster size blowups of these prints, I had my lawyers take it from there. In about six months time my case got to the Supreme Court. By this time my lawyers had enlisted the help of prominent scientists to document the pictorial evidence:

"There can be no doubt that this is a normal man. The angle of penetration and the positioning of the body are clearly identifiable with an exclusively heterosexual orientation."

G. Pudge
Anthropologist

"Is there any doubt that this man enjoys copulating with the female of the species? The vigorous pelvic thrusts (apparent in the blurred nature of exhibit #3) suggest a healthy and active heterosexual appetite. He'd certainly be a credit to any woman."

H. Pudge
Psychiatrist

"A lyrical and emotional documentation of the male-female relationship. The beautiful tones combined with the subtle direction of the unique Grubacher style cannot fail to convince anyone of the depth of this male-female relationship."

J. Pudge
Popular Photography

In a landmark decision the Supreme Court upheld my heterosexuality by a 7-2 vote. Curiously, the two dissenting justices had advanced to the final round of Oscar Mosco's Chinese checkers tournament. The remainder of the court had been eliminated in the early rounds and had issued a statement voicing their bitterness about the conduct of certain parties throughout the tournament.

So, let it be recorded that Mr. Justice K. Pudge wrote this brief but definitive opinion regarding Mr. Danny Dolly versus the People of the United States: "It is the opinion of this court that photographic evidence far outweighs the testimony of other interested parties. With all due respect to Chaplain Mosco, one must nevertheless conclude that the lens of the Hasselblad 500c is far more qualified to accurately record the facts than are the eyes of a seventy-four year old man. The issue here is not whether a man should be penalized for his sexual preferences. The issue here is, in fact, what nature of evidence should be allowed to reflect the sexuality of a given individual. Photographic evidence being decided hereupon as the evidence of

fact, this court by a 7-2 plurality concludes that Mr. Danny Dolly does direct his sexual energies toward the female of the species."

K. Pudge
Associate Justice
United States Supreme Court

The President, who had made a surprisingly poor showing in the Chinese checkers tournament, was agreeable to the decision of the court. He went on national television whereupon he delivered, what is in the opinion of most historians, his most elegant speech. Accompanied in the background by a medley of Fats Domino's greatest hits, our chief executive presented the three, now priceless, photos of the wife and me. In a refreshingly lyrical style he recited the accompanying testimonials of the social scientists. He topped off the evening by showing a special five minute movie of the wife and me engaged in all sorts of sexual acrobatics. The wife and I had agreed to star in this graphic flick to, in the words of the President, "leave no shadow of a doubt as to the sexual appetites of these two fine citizens."

Suffice to say, certain breeds of Texas Christianity violently objected to such blatant exhibition of sexual activity over the mass media. This resulted in another legal adventure. Mr. Oscar Mosco, though miffed at me, defended my right to copulate, "where and whenever I pleased." He still remained firm in his conviction that I was a homosexual, but he claimed he would not let this bias him from defending my right of "freedom of sexual expression."

Unfortunately for the wife and me, in the weeks that followed the exhibition of our movie, an extremely high incidence of sex crimes were recorded across the nation. Indeed, the President himself was reported to have used his office to illegally tax various companies which produced devices intended to enhance sexual activity. This, according to the American Bar Association, constituted a sex crime.

With the heat on the President and the dignity of his office at stake, a secret meeting was convened at a little known flea circus in a Texas border town. In a gesture of patriotism I agreed to take the rap. A few weeks later the high court rendered a final decision:

"That Mr. Danny Dolly did encourage the production of and did participate in a movie, the purpose of which was to stimulate others sexually through the depiction of various sexual acts. Such a motion picture does not have nor could it ever have socially redeeming value. In view of this, society can only be served by locking up Mr. Dolly for an indeterminate period until such time he renounces his pornographic patterns of behavior."

L. Pudge
Chief Justice
United States Supreme Court

America, America, America

For the Quincentennial Revolution, 2276

BY BRUCE BOSTON

Past cordons and radiation placards
in refugee defiles where genes
are crimped but not broken,

where exoplebes gather in sects
pristine or decadent and the books
encased in mylar are read by the page,

where they bootleg the psychoactives
which can discreate the self or free it
from the cordons lodged within,

I learned my ripening madness
mirrored the rife madness all about,
I revelated the self-evident:

that we are the many who serf the few,
that those honorable statesmen
who have ruled in returning cycle

through the static generations
—George with his wooden mumbling,

bearded Abe of the martyred eyes,

Franklin in his motorized chair,
lean, clever John, unflappable Ron—
are only simulacrum resurrections

run by machines, run by men and
women who are less human still:
whose throats lie sleek and columnar,

whose eyes lake like mercury,
who dwell in the palaces of state,
who ride the silent limousines,

who fear the infrared crosshairs,
who suddenly cultivate a garden
of indefinite tomorrows.

An Interview with Thomas M. Disch

Thomas M. Disch is one of the more talented and controversial figures in the science fiction field. His body of work encompasses short stories, novels, poems, opera libretti, essays, book reviews, and now even an interactive novel. In every instance he has chosen to work at a level of ambition of which only a handful of other genre writers share in the attempt. He has created works of a remarkably high quality, and at the same time enraged many for his failure to fall into the lockstep of genre requirements. The following interview took place on August 11, 1984 in Tom Disch's Manhattan apartment.

Last Wave: I think of you as being a joyful writer, as opposed to being the depressing writer which many other people seem to paint you. In your early novel *The Genocides*, for instance, which is one often given as an example of a depressing work because the benign, indifferent aliens win, I find triumphal joy, for the protagonists in it do triumph with dignity against great odds over the human evil around them. In your recent *On Wings of Song*, which I've read one reviewer claim to be a cynical book, I see a happy ending: David Weinreb *does* get free and fly. For some reason many people prefer to see him as dying. In rereading these two works and all else inbetween, I just don't see the cynicism which the overwhelming majority of readers chooses to focus on.

Why do you think there is this myth of your work being such a downer?

Disch: I have to agree with you on the first part of your contention that the predominant drift is towards, if not outright joy, good feelings of one sort or another. I think that is the case often in spite of the tragic or comic denouement of a particular story. It procedes from the high spirits that a good writer feels when he's writing at the top of his bent. It feels good to write well, and to hit a streak of writing well feels so good that it's almost impossible not to come away yourself as a writer without a sense of bouyant accomplishment and with a certain love. That's not to say that every ending of every story has to be construed as somehow a triumph of the spirit. The ending of *On Wings of Song* is positive for me but only if you interpret Daniel's end as a moral triumph according to a certain secularist view of Christianity that the book sets forward in its own pages. Daniel has a conversation with Mrs. Schiff after he's been singing a Bach cantata at Marble Collegiate Church, and that was where I planted my rationale for Daniel to be a kind of exemplary figure of the artist as a kind of secularized figure of Christ. And in so far as he fulfills the Christian paradigm with his last great stage show and his redeeming lie, he's become a figure of the particular ironical Christ that the book has been talking about. That's not to say that I had all of these thoughts in my head as I wrote the thing. I had a long time to live with it, and also a long time as I wrote it to be thinking about what this or that meant. As to what a particular passage in the book means, you have to return to that passage and see what the words are and how they balance against other words and that means that what you're doing is taking—in a book as long as a novel, and a novel that is worked at not at the high tempo of other pulp work, where a novel might be accomplished in two or three weeks of total adrenalin output, the Simenon way of writing a book, but if a novel is written over a long period, as mine necessarily are—they work out as in effect taking the average of the best energies of that many months of my life, and if I give my best creative energies to the work for such a long period, the result is liable in most cases to be an upper, to convey high spirits, because art compresses time. It compresses hours of a writer's thought into

minutes of a reader's reading. The result of that high compression should be a sense of richness, just as it is when you're making jam or jelly. When the best thoughts of twelve hours boil down to twelve minutes, the effect on the reader is either a very rich dessert, or a very flavorful meat; those cases, again, are examples of compression.

Last Wave: But if this is your intention, then you'd agree that there has been a lot of misinterpretation as to both your intention and the result?

Disch: The second part of your question as to why do other people...? Well, I think a lot of people can't tolerate rich food. Literally. I mean, sometimes their digestion just won't assimilate it. One man's meat is another man's poison, right? I long ago came to certain feelings about life, certain postures of defense or aggression with respect to this or that kind of person, this or that kind of social dilemma, which would probably be interpreted by many other people as wrong, or threatening. Sometimes it would be as simple as being intellectually threatening, as when a textbook takes for granted Darwin's theory of evolution. Well, there's *many* theories about how things work besides the official one, evolution, etc. A very good joke about something you hold sacred counts with some people as blasphemy, and that can be called in turn nihilism. Nihilism is the adjective enemy critics most often come up with for me. Or black humor, which is to say, humor which laughs at something they believe in. Well, if I don't believe in it, I'm not obliged to regard it as "black." I laugh at what I consider people's folly, and if the people who are committing those follies don't want to laugh along, they have to call my joke something else. So they call it black humor or nihilism. And it's not just the jokes. Tenderer feelings are just as susceptible to being misnamed by people who don't want to share them, so that liberals are called "soft-hearted liberals." Orson Scott Card once got my goat when he, in a review of a story of mine, "Concepts," said that if he thought people were really like they're described in that story, then he would have to commit suicide. To which my reply has always been, "Yes, Orson, they *are* like that." I can point out the very people that were being described in that story.

But what he's saying, really, is that if people can be living lives that are fully human and which nevertheless ignore all of *his* most closely held values, then what good are those values for him? That's almost anyone's self-interested position when they encounter the expression of different values. If I were to see a bushman going about on one of those crosscountry walks where they spend years in the desert having visions, eating insects, and doing all the things that bushmen have to do to survive, I would think, "Oh, my god, what a wasted life, I'd rather kill myself than live like that!" It's the possibility that life could be experienced, lived, and thought about a different way, and if your attitude is sufficiently unlike your audience's there will be a toxic reaction. I think that's happened with most first rate artists, that they usually have a handle on a way of dealing with the world which strikes other people as intolerably flip, or intolerably earnest, or both, because they actually see the world differently. They take different things for granted.

Last Wave: Are they a different species?

Disch: No, it's training the perceptions. You perceive things differently. Which means that though you can persuade people of a certain attitude if you take them step by step through the process by which you arrived at that view of things, if you just assume that attitude and proceed from there to tell the story based on those assumptions, the result is disconcerting. That disconcertion can be experienced either as strange and wonderful or as strange and threatening, depending, I suppose, on whether the reader, in his own movement, in creating his own frame of perceptions, is heading in the direction you've gone. So the lack of sympathy is basically a way of avoiding talking about the issue, the subject matter that the narrative is dealing with. I think it's amazing when I look over the reviews that I get, favorable and unfavorable, how seldom critics or reviewers ever deal with the substantive matter of poetry. It's true of prose, too, but there's a story there people can reprise, and that's what most reviewers do. They just tell the story and offer a few little interpretations of this or that detail. In poetry, all that is left is a bare statement with which one can either agree or disagree—at least if one writes discursive poetry as I do, poetry which presents an argument

about certain facts of life, and says what you make of them—well, even reviewers who *like* what I do, rarely say what it is I'm talking *about*. And people who don't like it, they'll say, "It's very clever." Well, my point in writing a poem isn't to display my cleverness. The cleverness is, as it were, a tool for getting across a particular idea that I want to communicate with maximum punch. It's as though people, instead of registering the punch, heard the sound effect. It's frustrating.

Last Wave: One poem you recently published, "On Science Fiction," resulted in a powerful punch. It caused a great stir. I think, considering its message, you must have expected the response, but did you expect the reaction to be quite what it was?

DIsch: As far as I know, that actually was a positive reaction—it won the Rhysling Award What I said about people not arguing with you, well, I've read that poem on many occasions. People react with laughter first. (There's many parts in it that provoke that response.) Let me say what I think the meaning of the poem is, and where it comes from. It chiefly has to do with my ambivalent feelings about the respect in which the audience in science fiction and their particular emotional demands govern the nature of the fantasies that science fiction writers tell them. Many people have observed that genre fiction is created at least as much by reader expectations as these are interpreted through editors, as by the actual creative needs of the writers themselves. So that people know that there's a certain kind of cuddly fantasy that's called high adventure, high fantasy, the Tolkien imitation, for which there is a large and apparently almost insatiable demand, and the emotional needs that that sort of cuddly fantasy is intended to satisfy are those that could fairly be characterized as being childlike in nature. The very first critical piece I wrote on science fiction said that it was a brand of children's literature and that caused all sorts of hackles to rise. An enormous amount of science fiction is written for children, and for grownups who have never lost touch with certain of the needs, dilemmas, and pleasures of childhood. And that includes most of the *Dungeons and Dragons* type of fantasy. The poem deals with the fact that another

emotional characteristic of much of the science fiction audience is the desire for a kind of fantasy the emotional substructure and subtext of which is remarkably akin to the emotional needs of invalids, of people who have been physically crushed by life and who consequently feel different. Because their experiences are different. I characterized this invalidism as being one of clubbishness, a certain "Let's all cuddle together," the ghetto mentality in science fiction, the feeling that you can make a pact against the bad guys out there. It's a very common human feeling, but one that's intensified among invalids as among children because of their consciousness of total dependency *vis a vis* adult or beneficent authority, and one's resentment towards that outer world, which is usually represented in ill-concealed fantasies of the worm turning, and the cripples being able to beat hell out of the lucky whole people of the world.

Last Wave: *The Revenge of the Nerd.*

Disch: The revenge of the nerd. John Varley had written this story that so perfectly expressed that syndrome of feelings. It's called "The Persistence of Vision." It was an extremely popular story in science fiction, and I thought its popularity was symptomatic of my diagnosis of what that story means. So that poem is in effect a criticism. Everything that I've said is implicit in that poem, and indeed, the poem says it much better. I've never known anyone to argue with the poem. Indeed, I think—

Last Wave: They never argue that they're not invalids?

Disch: Well, they could try. Or they can say that John Varley's story doesn't *really* express what I'm saying it expresses. I did have one reaction from Liz Lynn, which was that she read it and she thought "Oh, that son of a bitch," meaning me, specifically for using Varley's story as grist for my mill, but then read it again and said she couldn't fault it as an account of what that means and then further of what it says about science fiction. She came around to saying that she had to agree with the argument the poem was making.

This may be beside the point or not, but the best piece of criticism I ever had of the poem was when I was in Buffalo and I read it in a reading and in the first row of the audience there was a paraplegic about my own age, a man in a wheelchair, who after the poem had been read and the meeting was over, wheeled forward and insisted that it was the best account of the experience of being handicapped that he'd ever come across. I felt good that I got it right on that side, too. See, the poem starts off and says "We are all cripples." I'm not excluding myself.

Last Wave: I didn't think you were. However, the people who you are talking about when you say "we" are the same people who would say, "No, you're wrong. I'm not a cripple." Wouldn't you say so?

Disch: Yes, and so do many cripples. One of the ways that cripples cope is by organizing olympics, and the poem talks about that, too, the respect in which you can deny the fact that your legs don't work if you have a wheelchair basketball game. So my basic attitude is that I am saying things that people don't want to hear because they're home truths. That's the business of writers, to make those truths not only apparent, but to reconcile people to them, too. Because I do think that that poem is ultimately and properly understood reconciling.

Last Wave: Do you think it will cause the shrouds to fall from people's eyes? Will it change anyone's mind?

Disch: I think the idea will stick in their heads like a thorn. I think that a good story is not forgotten, that the mark of a good story is that you go on remembering the events of a story, reliving them, fretting over them, arguing with the fatal necessity for this or that thing to happen in the story. A good book activates an implicit dialogue with the reader that is like an argument. It's not like a daydream machine. And that, of course, is not the usual expectations of genre literature. Most genre is meant to be experienced as a daydream and is experienced as such, so when you offer in the genre something that, while it offers certain vicarious pleasures as every

narrative account does (I'm not so postmodernist that I don't want people to just lose themselves in the page-turning experience of hallucinating that imaginary event with the highest possible degree of imaginative high resolution), at the same time I do expect people as they move back from the involvement with the actual reading on the page that they have that reverberation, or even that they would at certain calculated moments in the text come to a full stop because they've just had a spitball thrown at them. Very often in the engagement with the reader, you're in the position of the pitcher *vis a vis* the batter: You want to strike the reader out; you want to surprise him. And if narrative fiction is successfully surprising, that means that you're violating the reader's expectations. How *far* you can go on violating them and still maintain the illusion of the magic theatre in the mind is a recipe that varies with every narrative art.

Last Wave: From what I've read in one of your other interviews, you haven't always held these beliefs. When you started writing the first things you did were psuedo-Asimov robot stories.

Disch: Oh, that's when I was ten years old!

Last Wave: What was it that attracted you to that sort of writing back then?

Disch: When one is ten and writing on nickel tablets... I was just writing rephrasings of synopses of Asimov plots. I've never tried to *market* those works.

Last Wave: But you could have chosen someone like Robert Louis Stevenson as a model. What is it that attracted you to that specific...

Disch: Oh, there's probably a strong influence of Eugene O'Neill because at the same time period I was reading *Strange Interlude,* and I loved stories of sexual passion and intrigue, precisely because I had absolutely no notion what it was about. It was just a Wonderland to me, like Alice's. That is to say, O'Neill and Asimov equally were about worlds that I had no knowledge of, and they seemed equally

real or unreal to me. They were things that happened in books, totally outside my experience as an eleven-year-old boy in Fairmont, Minnesota. The notion that there's such a thing as realistic fiction, that there is some fiction that is not fantastic, has always seemed to me a very doubtful propositon. All fiction is about something not in your life. Often it's appreciated in proportion as it is unlike anything in your life. I would suppose that there's little difference between a housewife reading a Georgette Heyer romance set in the year 1810 and a boy reading a Heinlein adventure about astronauts; those experiences are equally foreign, strange, and unreal to the reader. Similarly, *Anna Karenina* —a masterpiece of realism—is for most Americans a book that is much stranger in all of its details and assumptions than a Stephen King novel in which the only strange things are the supernatural elements of the plot and all of the people are just like your neighbors next door.

Last Wave: How do you think it is that you, growing from ten-year-old Tommy Disch, also grew out of fixating on one *particular* strange thing, which is what these "cripples" we were just talking about have done: there's one particular type of strange world that they've chosen to rely on. How do you think it is that you managed to go beyond that?

Disch: I guess I don't have an addictive personality. I don't with regard to other things people become addicted to. Very often my first reaction is "What was that?" or "Why was that supposed to be fun?" Very often with fiction that's supposed to be addictive, I will only be aware of the shoddiness, as when you see a Japanese horror movie that's just silly, right? It's the whole question of sophistication. There isn't a genre that I wouldn't appreciate if I encountered an example of something really well done in it, and my taste is really quite catholic in things. The one thing I can't enjoy is incompetence or—I'm trying to think if there's a non-elitist way to put the matter...

Last Wave: Laziness?

Disch: Shoddiness. It's easy to see in visual art. Or rather, most people will look at a very bad, amateurish drawing, such as you see

in most science fiction magazines, especially in the fanzines, and none of the formal qualities that are associated with good drawing such as polish, execution, the fineness of the line, all of the formal qualities that an art teacher would tell somebody about in a drawing class—none of that is present. The only thing that is there is what you often see presented in casebook studies of psychotic or disturbed children. There's a certain expressive content in those drawings that can be interesting because you interpret the image as having come from a particular kind of disturbed person, and mirroring, therefore, the condition. So in a way the symptomatic content of bad art can be interesting. When you're adult, when you have adult tastes, you can look at something very quickly and say: "Yes, that has it," or "No, that doesn't have it." And similarly, when you're reading prose, you can just as quickly, practically within a paragraph, say, "Yes, that has it," or "No, that doesn't have it." Sometimes there are grey areas of people who have something, but not enough, as in art, but the clear blacks and whites of the two ends of the spectrum are very easy to recognize in almost all cases.

Last Wave: Algis Budrys wrote an essay titled "Paradise Charted" that was published in *TriQuarterly*. Writing about the New Wave Group, he stated that "without them, Disch, who went to England a clumsy nihilist, would probably never have become the complex artist and subtle master of style he is now." Do you agree with this claim of there having been an artistic transformation?

Disch: No, I do not. I think Ajay is just trying to wiggle around the fact that he trounced my first books when they came out. He had a quite visceral and honest antipathy to my early work, and when he found that he could no longer simply deny the quality of it, he had to find a way by which he could explain the fact that he'd initially given me those bad reviews, which were quite intemperate bad reviews, and an expression of his deep and continuing commitment to a very different world view than mine. But when he couldn't go on saying that I was just a numbskull, he had to find some convenient point in which he could rewrite history. He knows nothing about my inner life in that period, and he has no privileged information about it. He has only the books, several of which I suppose he hasn't read. Does

one religiously read all the works of a writer one has dismissed as a piffling upstart? Really, with much of this, I think we're just talking about the generation gap. I'll condescend to him now, as he has so often to me. He was in the unhappy position of being an intellectual in the science fiction field when it was even less acceptable and less noticeable. I mean most people who enjoyed his work didn't enjoy it because of his literary capabilities. At the same time he grew up in a social environment where artists felt called upon to exaggerate certain macho posturings of the Hemingway sort. He was of the generation that really worshipped Hemingway, and Budrys took it on himself to be the Humphrey Bogart of science fiction, you know, a strong, tough, silent guy. He did it pretty well in a few books, but I think that has always proven a dead end. Writers who adopt that posture always seem to find that they have writers' block at the point in their career when they simply can't snarl at themselves convincingly in the mirror anymore.

Last Wave: So then what actually happened during your stay in England? In terms of writer's growth, was there—

Disch: Yes! And my stay in Mexico the year before that, where I was writing *The Genocides*. That was probably a more significant thing. Coming to New York from the Midwest was an earlier still more significant thing. The landmarks in one's intellectual progress from the age of fifteen till the age of thirty come fast and furious. They should. If one isn't constantly growing and assimiliating new experience and awareness and developing a more "mature" philosophy at that time, one would be doing the opposite, one would be decaying. You can only grow or die as an artist. At the same time, it's perfectly possible for any artist once he has the keyboard in his fingers, once he knows his instrument, to make the music of the art form that he's chosen. Talent is real, and it's a horrible and rather unavoidable truth that some people have it and some people don't and there are grey areas inbetween, but I had it. I've never had any doubt about having it. At a certain point sometimes that simply makes you look arrogant; to say: "I got it." But if I hadn't had that confidence in my own early capabilities, if I hadn't been assured of it by a few chosen and helpful spirits, I

wouldn't have had the strength to go on writing as I did, in the face of systematic discouragement from all of those people who are in positions of power who don't have it and don't like those who do, for very obvious reasons. The del Reys of the world, shall we say?

Last Wave: Looking back over the body of your work, you seem to rely less and less on experimental tricks of style. Tricks is probably not the right word for it, but in your early works there was more playful typography, there was the convoluted chart for 334, etc. Instead, now you seem to have moved more to a straight controlled narrative that is askew in the way it looks at what's going on.

Disch: I don't think I ever... not tricks of typography...

Last Wave: In "Let Us Quickly Hasten to the Gates of Ivory", you had tombstones...

Disch: Those were grace notes. And if you count the poetry as being a steady attendent task, there's any amount of formal concern, and playfulness.

Last Wave: In your fiction, then.

Disch: Even there there's been tendency to keep away from what I think of as easy surrealism, to a varnished surface, but even that isn't antithetical necessarily. I guess the most experimental stories I ever did would be "The Master of the Milford Altarpiece" and "Quincunx" in '68, '69. But I think of my best early stories as being quite straightforward narratively: "Descending," "The Roaches," "Casablanca"...

Last Wave: If you look at *Camp Concentration,* which is in the form of a diary, and later on—

Disch: There's nothing experimental about a diary.

Last Wave: Not experimental then. Perhaps what I'm talking about is a choice of tools. You've chosen a different set of tools in the recent novels.

Disch: There's nothing experimental in a diary. But it allows the possibility of fancy skating because I could indulge in the kind of fancy writing that people do in diaries, which it would be aesthetic bad manners to indulge in if you didn't have the excuse of a first person writing presumably for his own pleasure and in which the vocalises were just a natural outgrowing of the fictional man's own intellectual high spirits. But the last book I've done, which isn't published, called *A Troll of Surewould Forest,* is possibly the zaniest, most far out science fiction I've ever done. I think each time the experiment is different. In some respects you could also say that *A Troll of Surewould Forest* is the one that's most like a comic book. It's crudest in certain ways, and in fact it strenuously tries to be. It strives for vulgarity. It has truly broad comedy and lots of zesty obscenity. Yes, I'm praising myself but readers have had those reactions to it, and editors have been appalled by it for those reasons, so I don't think I'm just imagining that I've done it. I think that I've described the book fairly. So whether I'm being defensive about, "Have I betrayed my early experimentalism...?" I never thought I was being that experimental, honestly. I didn't do anything for which I didn't know what the precedents were, with the one exception of that framework thing in *334*. I've never met anybody who understands what that represents without my explaining it. But I did put it there as a footprint in the sand. I didn't think it right to do an essay explaining this brilliant invention of mine, but I wanted to leave proof in the book that the structure of the novella part of *334* was determined by a formal principle unlike any formal principle of ordering fiction that I'd ever heard of before. I'd invented something there. To my mind that's the one genuine experimental thing that I've done, in that I know of no precedent for it, and I think that it was a genuinely good if very difficult thing to do. I've never repeated it, though, so if it had been that good I probably would have gone on to employ that principle again. I'm writing something now called *Eternity* which I might find lends itself to the same kind of three dimensional construction that I used then.

Last Wave: Experiment also may be the wrong word for what I'm trying to look at. If we can assume that there is a "norm" of literature of the third person narrative where you're the storyteller telling things that happened to other people in a straightforward manner and your beliefs come through only in how you choose to describe what these people are doing, as opposed to first person narrative as in "The Squirrel Cage" or "Come to Venus Melancholy," stories which if not experimental are a different way of telling the story.

Disch: I think the change that's happened (and I think there is one) isn't a formal one, in terms of being relatively more or less inventive. But I think there is necessarily probably a large one with regard to the emotional content or the emotional charge and the direction of that charge, too. I guess the cutoff point would be *334* between the young me and the old, mature me. And it has to do with my own accommodation to getting along in the world. It's the very common accommodation of middle age as against not simply youthful rebellion, but the distress of being young, and poor, and probably unemployable, and a feeling of being excluded from privilege, power, good schools, all of the things that a lower middle class boy, very ambitious, without social resources and without a good map. The distress of that situation is something that a lot of my early stories powerfully conveyed, and people who've reacted to those stories sympathetically have usually been people who've shared that situation, people usually in college, going through their own intellectual awakening as I was then, and feeling both the ambition and the distress and despair. Let us not neglect the sexual component in all this. In those circumstances few young men or women are likely to be leading emotionally fulfilling lives. So there's a complex of distresses. And young people's fiction usually speaks to the condition of that kind of young person. There are *other* kinds: those who've grown up in privilege, comfortable, in good families where they take their privileges for granted. Those young people usually come into an earlier success—people like Anne Beattie or Mark Halperin—but they will have the disadvantage that they've never left Middle Earth, that they've always grown up comfortable and so they're just wearing the clothes that their parents have bought for

them, beginning with the Harvard cap and gown. I think I have an advantage over them ultimately. That's what all selfmade men think.

Last Wave: You once wrote that for writers "to make it their conscious goal to win an award is to confuse literature with bowling." Don't you, though, sometimes write stories you feel so positive about that hope begins to spring in your heart, a story you think is so good that you say, "This is going to win the world over for me"?

Disch: No, because for one thing it would be a mistake to suppose that there is a strong correlation between quality and winning a prize. Prizes go to stories that excite the attention of the readership and fulfill their emotional demands in a particular way—the John Varley story being a case in point of a surefire winner—because of the relationship it creates with its audience. One story I have that's won some awards is "The Brave Little Toaster" and I didn't even write that intending it to be published as a science fiction story. It's meant to be a children's book, and I certainly wasn't thinking of a Newbery Award. Its success actually confirms what I said about science fiction being a branch of children's literature, because the one thing I've had that's been most popular in science fiction is something I *wrote* as a children's book. Disney is doing a feature cartoon of it. So I wasn't wrong in supposing that it was children's book, though children's book publishers have turned it down again and again, I suspect because it was published as a science fiction story and that makes them think that therefore it's not a children's book. But I only published it in F&SF once it had been turned down enough places and I figured, let's give it some attention. It brought it to Disney's attention, so I wasn't mistaken. It's a charming story, and it's one that's endeared itself to science fiction readers because the moral that it conveys is one that everybody can sympathize with. It's as simple as *The Little Engine That Could:* "I think I can, I think I can," but in this case it's: "All we appliances have to get together and cooperate if we're going to solve our problems." Now that's an undeniably positive moral to deduce. The charms of the story are, I think, self-explanatory. But there's nothing in that story that is challenging. The only way people have been able to have a negative view of it is if

they suppose I'm being sarcastic in writing it and that somehow I'm doing it cynically because they have decided that I'm such a blackhearted person that if something of mine *seems* to be light and pleasant, I must be fooling them. But that's the only respect in which people have been able to think of a way to show that it really is a product of the black-hearted Disch that they believe in.

Last Wave: But that's the way you intended "Feathers From the Wing of an Angel," which is not meant to be taken with all the sentimentality that is there.

Disch: It couldn't be, could it? It's transparently a hoot! And it's meant to be *seen* as a hoot. I had that in the Clarion workshop years and years ago. it dumbfounded everyone who was there, but two or three of the people, including, I think, Keith Laumer, had what I thought was the correct reaction, which is finding that *despite* yourself, these old mechanical ways of squeezing the emotions will work upon you.

What the story is is a study in our vulnerability toward the manipulations of fiction, and how hard it is to resist the calculated skillful effort to maneuver you to tears. Usually to tears. At least, that's the one that people are most aware of, because it's an overt physiological response. I think that one thing people who habitually read fiction can legitimately be interested in is their own psychology as readers of fiction, and therefore as willing dupes of the manipulations of skilled writers. The relationship between the willing dupe reader and the manipulative craftsman is often an interesting subject for fiction itself. A good deal of ironical fiction, or fiction about writers, deals with those subjects. I don't think there's any cynicism in paying attention to what is a fact. Look at any soap opera—that's manipulation going on. You can either enjoy the skill or deplore the ineptitude of the individual work that you're looking at, but that's the nature of the event. So to write something that points and says something about this interaction and has fun with it, to my mind that's just a way of having fun. It's a proper subject.

Last Wave: Would you say that the difference between you and the lazier, sloppier writers is that you're both pushing buttons but you are trying to push the ones that are the more difficult to push in terms of getting a reaction out of the reader, that you are working on a subtler level, but still trying to push that emotional response button?

Disch: Well, I don't know. My offhand reaction would be "yes, I think the difference exists," but I don't know if I'd claim to be "subtler". I usually think of myself as being very forthright. I think the advantage of my work is that I usually talk straightforwardly about things that most people push away under the table or hide in a closet—as long ago as the story "The Roaches," which is a story of insect fear, and ends up with the image of the woman who discovers she has this telepathic power over roaches and that this actually represents love between them, summoning all the roaches in Manhattan to her, and there's a final image of her lying back waiting to receive the massive embrace of all the assembled cockroaches of Manhattan crawling all over her. That story came from two or three years of thinking about the nature of horror stories that I read and seeing the obvious Freudian content, and wondering: What is the nature of insect horror? Why do people have this very strong reaction? Why should insects have this relationship to sexuality? It seemed to be that it was the idea of being touched against our will. The story brought up as almost a conscious statement the theory that I just put forward now. In most Lovecraftian horror fiction, the author seems genuinely naive and unaware of the what to me are obvious Freudian implications. I'm not alone in the 20th century or in the year 1984 in finding Lovecraft full of Freudian—not slips—because in some senses he successfully used people's buried fears and desires to create fictions that were powerful in their way. It was simply my intention to lift up the buried content of the Lovecraftian horror to virtually free statement or virtually overt statement and still have the narrative force of Lovecraftian horror. How far could you make the subtext visible and still have the emotional power of the naive art? That remains I think my central interest in writing fiction. How far can you say something about what reality is really like as against the lies we tell ourselves about

the lives that we're leading? A story like, "The Man Who Had No Idea," is a story about what our social relationships are really like, and it uses an improbable but droll proposition that you have to have licenses to make conversation as a springboard to the subject of what do we talk about when we talk about anything. What are all these social interactions *about?* What is the *subject* of them? In all situation drama on tv, you will hear people talking about something, and you will understand that they are really talking about their relationship. In those Carol Burnett stories of the Family, you'll see them arguing about scrabble scores, whatever subject comes up, they're not talking about that subject. The humorous force is rather the respect in which they invest their emotional needs, desires, and requirements, how these are the real subjects of all conversations on other matters. The comic thing is that always the real social meaning bubbles up through the daily chitchat into a family fight.

But that progression, that way of understanding social reality, can be applied to, must be applied to, every detail of life. To me, that's the purpose of art, to find ways to uncover the truth of what we do. Science fiction is wonderfully apt for that task, because you can simply state what your principle is. Instead of saying "We behave in rigid mechanical ways," you can write a story about a robot who illustrates what a rigid mechanical way of behavior is. You can dispense with metaphor and you can make the metaphor plot.

Last Wave: Science fiction is a metaphor itself.

Disch: It's metaphor that has turned into plot. Does that make sense?

Last Wave: Oh, it makes sense. The thing is, though, with stories of that type is that it's difficult to go to representatives of the respected "real" literature, what s.f. people unfortunately call "mundane" literature, and prove to them the fact that this story that you wrote is not about roaches, and it's not about a robot, and it's not about ray blasters, but that you've used this as a metaphor for life and emotions and how people relate. Why do you think that you

can't carry this over? How can you convince them that science fiction is just your metaphor?

Disch: This theory can be applied to the worst trash in a science fictional way or to Jorge Louis Borges, and it's true in both cases. There is a respect in which the intellectual interest in science fiction has generally had a vested interest in a naive science fiction that isn't aware of its own interpretable possibilities, because the highbrows who like to come to science fiction and discover it, their purpose in doing so is to be revealers of its meaning, so that somebody like Leslie Fiedler always complains that *he* likes science fiction to be vulgar and brightcolored and trashy (his words) and for the good reason that that allows Leslie Fiedler, the critic, an opportunity to display *his* skills, and to justify his occupation as a professional interpreter. When science fiction undertakes to be both the fiction and the metafiction of itself, when it incorporates within its own text the full interpretation of itself as a text, which good, ironic, modernist writing tends to do at least implicitly, by way of overcoming your objection of how do we know that there is an intelligence at work here? One of the ways is simply by leaving footprints in the text by way of not avoiding criticism, but making it redundant. The problem with making criticism redundant is that you won't receive much criticism. The science fiction writers who have been most written about are precisely the ones who have been most naive and whose work begs for interpretions because it was written in a state of childlike innocence as to its own meaning.

Last Wave: The Kilgore Trouts of the field?

Disch: Yeah! The dummies. Nice dummies, many of them, and some of them perfectly talented, but they weren't bright people. A. E. van Vogt, for instance. I've never met him, but in some ways he sounds like a rather kindhearted well-meaning teller of sincere fairytales. I mean, every one of them had an inventor, and the original tellers of fairy tales must have been people just like A. E. van Vogt, grannies sitting there at the fire, who wanted to make the children frightened of witches or vampires, and who told stories of young princes who would grow up and win young princesses, and

there were Hansel and Gretel sitting there listening to those tales and granny knows that Hansel thinks that he's the young prince, and Gretel thinks that she's the young princess. It's a charming grandfatherly feeling, and to be a good fiction writer at the simplest level all you need is that fireside gift of telling people what is they need to hear. It seems to be so symptomatic, for instance, that Marion Zimmer Bradley, before she was a writer of science fiction, was a carnival fortune teller, because if you think about what carnival fortune tellers do, it's so much like what genre fiction writers do. You size people up, you figure out what it is they want to hear, and then you tell them what they want to hear. "You're going to meet a tall, dark, and handsome man, and you're going to have two? Three? Four children by him," and so on. You spin out the tale according to the cues that that person is sending you. Genre writers are mostly flattering their audiences in parallel ways and for similar motives.

Last Wave: Vladimir Nabokov said the lowest form of appreciation of literature is the one in which you're identifying vicariously with the protagonist, living his life and identifying with him. Would you agree with that? That seems to be what you're saying science fiction does, is provide the reader a way of plugging into the novel as if it were a kind of video game for him.

Disch: Yes, but that lowest of his includes so many grand books and it really only allows of one other highest. He's not describing a situation that's a spectrum, is he? By that light, there are then only works that *forbid* you to have that vicarious identification, and those would be higher. In fact, he knows and I know that there are many perfectly incapable, incompetent, fusty works of literature that set up a barrier to vicarious identification, but without the magic of art they don't accomplish anything. So I don't think that's much of a touch, though, in that there can be first rate work that does it, and first rate work that doesn't do it, and most work is somewhere inbetween, in that you're encouraged to identify with a protagonist, simply because the focus is there, and you're imagining it, but then you are reminded that that protagonist may be a fool or a dodo or doing wrong things and you resist identifying, or suddenly you're identifying with somebody of the opposite sex because the point of view shifts. It

gets much more complicated than his description would allow for, and basically he was just apologizing for the kind of book he wrote and the kind of criticism he generally received for it, which was that, "Well, I can't *like* Humbert Humbert, so I don't like this book." You get enough dumb reactions like that, and you want to trounce your dumb critics on the head with the equal and opposite statement. But both sides are dumb, when you reduce things to that kind of formula.

Last Wave: You've for the most part managed to resist trouncing back at the critics. How have you done that?

Disch: No, I gave Algis his what for.

Last Wave: That was just now because we're doing an interview and I asked about it.

Disch: Well, indeed, I've done a lot of reviewing and I'm not a particularly gentle reviewer. If something is dreadful, and I've decided for one reason or another it's worth noting that it's dreadful, I'm quite willing to do so. I think there is such a thing as dreadful work. There are two kinds of dreadful work that would incense me. Shoddy work, where simply you're not receiving the basic execution that a paid writer should be rendering you for the money that you've paid, like when you go to a movie and you see the special effects are bad and unconvincing and the dialogue is out of sync, all the technical fuckups. Well, writers can do that same kind of thing and in genre fiction they're rarely called to task for it. And certain publishers characteristically publish books that are shamefully illwritten, and this has nothing to do with whether they're stories about cuddly teddybears in Middle Earth, or adventuring with Bobby Stargun into the outer galaxy. Any kind of book can be well or poorly written, and shoddy goods deserve reprobation, especially when a publisher makes them the standard product, as Del Rey does.

Last Wave: In your *Twilight Zone* column you were reviewing a novel by Ron Goulart, and you asked the question: "Is it really fair, I wonder, to review such a book as *Upside Downside?* Surely it wasn't published with that possibility in mind. Rather, it passed into

print routinely, a product of its industry, just as illiterate teenagers are finally graduated from high school in the interest solely of sparing the school and the student the embarrassment of overt failure. The author makes a bit of money, the publisher makes a bit of money, and a few copies might even be sold to guileless and unwary readers before this title is displaced on the racks by next month's titles. One might as well complain that jujubes aren't nourishing, or that subways are dirty. A bad review won't deter either Goulart or DAW from continuing to fulfill their roles in the industry, and I suspect the potential audience of *Upside Downside* doesn't read reviews ever. So why bother?" And you answer your question, that you want to teach the new writers who are at the "crossroads all new genre writers come to, where they must choose between hackwork and hard work." Do you think that it is working? Are you having an effect? Do you think anybody pays attention to that sort of stuff?

Disch: It's really hard to say. I'm sure that there are people out there who read the column and enjoy it, but whether the younger writers do, no, I don't think so. I think most of the people who've decided they're going to be science fiction writers have done so thinking it's going to be an easy way to earn a living. I think most of them are cynical by the time they're twenty, and aspire to be Barry Longyears and hacks of that ilk. I remember I was on a panel with Jack Chalker, and he felt that the only thing that a reviewer should do is to give cheerful, helpful tips about how you could write this novel better, and generally plug the idea of science fiction and behave in a comradely way selling "the product." The SFWA Bulletin is always filled with letters from the more miserable writers in the field saying how that they should club together and promote the idea of science fiction by drumming up interest at libraries and bookstores and generally colluding to sell "the product" as though once you've gotten to the point where you can publish a book and it exists as a book, then you should be accepted as one of the guild. It's a guild mentality, or the union mentality, and I've never wanted to join a union. I've always thought that that sort of thing is bad for "the product" itself, if you're to be concerned with the product, but simply from the point of view of the reader. Those people are trying to ensure their livelihood by seeing to it that nobody describes what

crimes they've committed. It's like the Human Resources Administration trying to cover up that daycare center in the Bronx where they've been raping children. Coverups are always the function of collusion. I'm not saying that Jack Chalker's books are *equivalent* to raping children, but I think they are rather equivalent to corrupting them. I think that he writes books that are sort of training grounds for nine and ten year olds to move on to Gor novels. They're preliminary S & M fantasies. You go on from reading Jack Chalker to being more thoroughly corrupted by a John Norman and *then* going on to rape children.

Last Wave: In a recent column, Russell Baker wrote that children will get tired of stealing hubcaps, but once a lout a lout forever. Do you think that reading bad literature is training people to accept bad literature?

Disch: It's training them to accept a poisoned environment, one in which their own emotional requirements are diminished and poor and sometimes vicious. Certainly uncaring towards the people with whom they have to share the environment. I think it's part of the system that it requires the profit motive as a sufficient excuse for any crime , whether the crime be depraving the taste of children or poisoning lakes with asbestos. Profit is for a certain kind of person, enough of an excuse for anything they do. If it earns money, they feel justified.

Last Wave: To go from the wretched to the sublime, in a list that you put together called "Thirteen Great Works of Fantasy from the Last 13 Years," you cite John Crowley's *Little, Big* as "the best fantasy novel ever. Period." Can you elaborate on that?

Disch: It's just such a wonderful book, but I have a hard time dealing with it, in that to my mind, Crowley is the one person of my generation whose work has exceeded in extent and equaled in quality my own. He's created a larger book than I ever have, a larger and a better book. There was a point when he was entering the field and we met and said "Howdy-do" that I had an instinctive sense that here is someone whose work I must avoid reading. I saw it in his eyes that

he had that lean and hungry look that Caesar was wary of in Cassius and to the degree that writers are rivals, it's painful. I mean, who was that German who went down in defeat to Daley Thompson in the decathalon just now? Anyhow, I feel that kind of rivalry towards Crowley and it's a very good thing that I do. He probably feels a reciprocal ambivilance to me.

Last Wave: Explain the difference if you will between that type of rivalry and Hemingway's desire to get in the ring with Doestyevsky.

Disch: There's nothing in my rivalry that would involve me wanting to *hit* John Crowley, that seems really an inappropriate response. I guess if you think in metaphors of boxing it would make sense. I don't. Watching boxing matches on television just always makes me squirm with discomfort. It's not a pleasant activity to me. But on the other hand I certainly can understand rivalry through other metaphors. But that's all just preliminary to saying that *Little, Big* absolutely defeated any residual reluctance to admit Crowley's accomplishment. It's hard to describe the nature of how it's good because it's unusually good in many ways and it's only by virtue of the multiplicity of its virtues that it is overwhelmingly terrific. To try and account for all the ways in which that book is good: The respect in which it evokes the entire spectrum of large scale emotional experiences available to men and women in a way that is archtypical, representative, and of course powerful; the emotional gamut that the book over its full span represents is larger than the emotional gamut of any other fantasy work that I know. It describes more of the central emotional experiences life offers: Our relationship to our parents, love, sacred and profane, the feeling of being predestined towards love and towards death, our relationship to transcendental experience, towards the sublime, its humor, passages that describe fear and the uncanny. It's got it all, and in each case he's done something sublime with that particular emotional moment. That's one thing the book has. The next thing is that the book is always beautifully written. And yet it's beautifully written without ever seeming to create unnecessary flourishes. It will rise sometimes to a very fireworky sort of thing, but only on occasions when that's strictly called for. I would contrast that to *Camp Concentration*, in

which some of the fireworky writing moments are spectacular for their own sake and not because the situation of the story at that moment seems to *require* fireworks. *Camp Concentration* is the work of a much younger writer, which I was, but it registers more as showing off than John's equally good writing at his best moments in his book. The one quarrel that I have with Crowley's is its relationship to history, and especially the character of the emperor Frederick Barberosa and his reawakening, and I suspect that John has a similar sense that he hasn't dealt with the span of human time and the respect in which we are all creatures of history, the inheritors, and in which our consciousnesses are functions of all that's gone before us. That's a flaw of the book, but as against its virtues, not one to make the book less great.

The final element that I think is wonderful in it is its use of the supernatural conceits that provide the fantastic element and his ability to encompass what I would call a Shakespearean tone towards the supernatural element, which is always doubted, but not in the way that James doubts his supernatural elements in *The Turn of the Screw*. Rather over the whole of the novel Crowley gives you a richer and richer sense of the metaphoric power of the idea of fairies, what they may mean, and by the end of the book he has made them mean so much that he can bring off their triumphant reality after their ambiguous existence through the course of the book in which they have figured as the central element of the story. That to me is a tremendous balancing feat. It resulted in what I felt was the most bravura ending in recent fiction and certainly the greatest ending in a fantasy novel, which usually tend to taper off at the end, when they strive for their grandest fantastic effects and don't cinch the question of the suspension of disbelief. Instead most fantasy novels disintegrate towards the end as their reach exceeds their grasp. Well, John reached and grasped, and the result was a thoroughly successful and to me utterly imposing work of fiction.

Last Wave: Who else would you say is trying to work at that level, is attempting the ambitious work?

Disch: There are many good writers in the field, but I don't think many of them have aimed for something as large as John's. I haven't set out to produce a novel that is a microcosm of everything that I could say about life, which *Little, Big* is. Maybe the body of my work could approximate that, but I have tried to create no masterpiece, giant novel.

Last Wave: Do you see yourself as working towards that?

Disch: I have hopes for *Pressure of Time* to be a very largescale work. I have different advantages. I invent more freely. I have more good ideas. John Crowley has an intensity and a tenatiousness of wit and a steadiness of focussed perception over a long term that are commendable. I move faster, I think. There's advantages in that. At this point I don't intend to compete with that book. I just admire it.

Last Wave: I was wondering how you relate your *Prisoner* novel, *Black Alice*, and your gothics to your body of work as a whole. Do you do what Graham Greene does when he divides the body of his work into his serious works and what he calls his "entertainments," or do you think of it all as a part of the whole?

Disch: I think there's a spectrum. Clearly there are some piffling works in my bibliography. The gothic I wrote with John Sladek, *The House That Fear Built*, can only be appreciated as camp. It has no other virtue. There are some scenes in it that are a hoot, and a few descriptions that are campy delights, but it was only written as a potboiler, so its only virtues would have to be incidental ones of that sort. *The Prisoner* was somewhat more seriously intended. I put my own name to it, that's a clue. I thought it was fun. I'd never written a James Bond type of novel and I was offered it and I needed the money. You don't write tie-ins for any other reason. I hadn't seen any of the T.V. programs when I agreed to do it and then I managed to sit in on two or three of them that were being broadcast at the time. I thought the set decorations were lovely and so I used the visual sense of the program, but I made up my own plot for it given the basic paranoid premise of the series. It was just my *jeu d'esprit* on paranoid themes. And sometimes you can have more fun. You don't

feel responsible towards your material. You can play around with it. It's certainly a fast way to write, because you don't feel responsibility for the ultimate product. So I think that there's a lot of graceful invention in the thing, but I think of it as a souffle at best. Next up the line, *Black Alice,* I suppose, or *Echo Round His Bones,* those were both works written to a deliberate conscious formula, and one that I don't have any ultimate allegiance towards. That sort of thing can be done well or ill but I don't feel that either of them would hold much interest for somebody who's going to study my work for what it means, because I think in both cases the stories are dictated by genre requirements rather then by expressive need. Then there's a work that could be called gothic, *Clara Reeve,* which I think is central to my *oeuvre,* if I have an *ouevre.* That was only written under a pseudonym because Bob Gottleib of Knopf said it had to be a pseudonym. And I said, "All right." I didn't have much choice; I wanted to have a book brought out by Knopf, they did a good job with it. But I intend, as soon as ever I can have it reprinted, to restore my name as author, because I was very proud of it and when I set out to write it I wrote it with a conscious sense of ambition, meaning it to be the best of its kind that ever had been done. And I think that in a way it is. It's the gothic novel to end all gothic novels to my mind and a few people agree. It's a formal notion. I mean, I'm a very formalist writer. When I approach a book, I have before me an idea of what kind of book it should be and that idea is based on predecessor books that other people have written. In that sense I've never been experimental. I've always had models in mind for what I mean to do. For instance, for *The Pressure of Time* I think my predecessor novel is probably *Anna Karenina* or that kind of large scale social fabric focussed on two or three central figures and on one central female protagonist, but seen with as large a span of social detail and reality as you can possibly bring to bear.

Last Wave: Many of your characters seem to be fascinated by Marcel Proust. In rereading your work, I ran across at least seven or eight characters who were in the middle of it and one of them calls his *Remembrance of Things Past* "the dullest and best of all books." I'm wondering about its fascination for you.

Disch: Proust is no longer the bane of my existence, because I did finally finish it so now I don't have to write about it anymore. I got it out of the way and I have no other huge novel that I'm in the guilty middle of. There's some that I've started and put aside and I think I will never read, but there's none that I'm halfway through and feeling guilty for, as I was for years and years with Proust.

Last Wave: At the end of your story in *Dangerous Visions*, there was a list of about 75 stories you intended to never, ever write. I don't find any of these titles familiar and I'm wondering if you ever wrote any of them.

Disch: Any of those? No. They are ideas that got scrapped. And since then I've probably generated two hundred more. If I could print the list of aborted fetuses of stories it would be quite imposing by now. Some of them are very nice titles.

Last Wave: Regarding Samuel Delaney's *The American Shore*, do you feel deserving of a book length exegesis of a single one of your short stories? What is your reaction to that?

Disch: I was tickled. Lord knows it's not a bad book. Chip probably has a feeling towards me like I was expressing about John Crowley's rivalry. His way of dealing with it was to write *The American Shore*. Which is to say that he would intellectually encompass a work of mine so thoroughly that he would as it were wrap it up entirely in a cocoon of his own spinning. Of course at the same time he himself knows enough that that's only a metaphorical possibility, that the story exists outside of his interpretation, but...it seemed to have been a good thing for him to have done.

Last Wave: Do you think that "Angouleme" is the short story you've written that is the most deserving?

Disch: I think you can do that with any story. His precedent was Roland Barthes' book *S/Z*. This is a book in which Roland Barthes did exactly the same treatment of a Balzac story called "Sarrazine." He broke that story up into "scenes" as he called them, numbered in

the same way, and then he wrote exegeses of every line of the Balzac story, and printed the Balzac story as an accompaniment. Chip's book was formally modelled after the Barthes book, and the difference is that Barthes chose his Balzac story as being one that he knew was almost laughably prolix and unreadable and silly. I don't think Chip had that attitude towards "Angouleme." But as to "Is this story more deserving of that attention than any other?"—Any story that anybody's ever written could be examined that closely by a critic of sufficient gifts, and the results would be interesting. This case of minute examination is like using the microscope. Things that aren't interesting in real life, are insignificant—the edge of a leaf, the wing of a mosquito—become fascinating and beautiful under a microscope. It's an interesting and valuable critical approach. But the object of the book is almost beside the point. What is important is the opportunity for the critic to demonstrate his toolbox.

Last Wave: You've written opera librettos for "Frankenstein" and "The Fall of the House of Usher." How much attention is paid to them by the opera world?

Disch: Virtually none, because Greg hasn't been able to get a production for "Frankenstein," though we had the one out in Long Island to a piano score. There was to have been a performance in Baltimore, but they cancelled their season. We're talking about small opera houses. And Greg seems to be making his fame as a critic, alas, instead of as a composer. I thought it was a very good opera. I'm naturally partial. I think that a good libretto really constitutes the modern descendant of the verse play. Verse plays are an extinct creature pretty much, unnatural and unwanted. But opera is a living art in that it's still performed. And I love opera. It's the only kind of stage performance that I regularly and by preference attend, paying my own money for it. Having been offered the possibility to participate in an art in which I've always been just a spectator I had to say yes. It was a good experience both times. I simply wish there were more opera composers in the world knocking at my door. On the other hand, I haven't done the obvious thing and approached those opera composers whom I admire and say: "Look, these are the

librettos I've done," because another part of me knows that writing opera libretti is a thankless and not very profitable task.

Last Wave: Whose choice was it for the two operas to be adaptations of...?

Disch: I worked as an agent for hire. Greg wanted to do an opera on both of those themes. I resisted "Frankenstein," in fact, for a couple of years while we discussed it. I was always willing to kibitz with him about it. Finally, after we kibitzed enough, I talked myself into doing it. The final dramatic shape of it is at least as much mine as his. There were certain things that he always wanted—the final dramatic monologue of the creature on the ice was always to have been the last curtain. There were other things that were my specific inventions, such as the long murder of the bridal night scene, in which the creature, entering Elizabeth's room, stabs her and continues stabbing her through the entire length of what amounts to a perverse love duet. That, when it was performed, really worked. It truly had people taken aback. It was dramatically successful. It also got a bit of stage blood on the shirt of the person sitting next to me. That's the difficulty of operas in the round.

Last Wave: In *The Businessman,* you have John Berryman as one of the major characters. What exactly does he represent to you as a poet? Why John Berryman rather than some other suicidial poet who might fill some of the same narrative needs?

Disch: It's set in Minneapolis, St. Paul, and he committed suicide right there. So in the sense of having a ghost at hand, he would be there as a ghost. That part of it is just history and fact. But he lends himself perfectly to the tone of the novel and its themes. If he hadn't jumped off the bridge it would have been necessary to invent him. But it wasn't necessary so it was fine to have him there in all his reality. He seemed to fit right into the book without any problem. Everybody's pleased to see him there. He's needed in various ways. The book posits an afterlife in which everybody survives somehow or another, one way or another, which means that there would be the ghosts of real people in the afterlife. Adah Mencken is a real person,

but most people wouldn't have known about her. For most people she wouldn't even register as an historically real ghost. But John Berryman is fresh enough in people's minds that people will realize, yes, that's a real person. That also makes Adah's claims for her reality stronger. And partly the advantage of it is just suspending disbelief. Very few of us had a chance to meet Berryman, but we've read things about him and we read his own account of himself. He was his own subject more than any other modern poet. He was self-obsessed in describing himself as an impossible person. If you can create a portrait of somebody that people know, somebody who's portrayed himself clearly and vividly, and if your portrait extends this known real existence as an "impossible" person, but which is known to be real only through literature, in an appropriate afterlife with Dantean punishments that have poetic justice to them, and him being a lover of Dante, it seemed an absolutely perfect person for giving an afterlife to. He was always a delight to have in the book. I always wondered if people who knew him would take offense, but so far...

Last Wave: Have you had any contact with his relatives?

Disch: Not relatives, but one person who knew him said it was a very good portrait. They were entirely convinced that it was, as it were, drawn from life. The reason for that is that he portrayed himself so well in his own work that you only had to read that and he's there. I suppose part of it was writing *Neighboring Lives.*, and getting a sense of everybody in the past as being susceptible to portraiture thanks to their own work at portraying themselves. Writers so often do that; they're wonderful subjects. That's why there are so many biographies of writers. It's not that writers are important; they're not. But, one, the people who write biographies are also writers, so they're interested in writers, so they write about writers, and two, writers have written so much about themselves that they make the biographer's task much easier, than say, astronauts, who might have led much more fascinating lives, but they haven't left documents behind them, except in personnel files which aren't interesting. Writers make the task of the biographer so much easier.

Last Wave: On the other hand, there's an essay by Harlan Ellison he wrote for the Harlan Ellison issue of *Fantasy and Science Fiction* called "You Don't Know Me, I Don't Know You" in which he points out the foolishness of thinking you can know anything at all about a writer from his or her work.

Disch: Bullshit.

Last Wave: Do I know you from this table full of books?

Disch: I should hope so! I should hope anybody who's read that pile of books knows more about me than somebody who's spent a week on vacation with me.

Last Wave: He was making a statement about the sort of person who would say that because he wrote a story with a chauvinist in it that he was a chauvinist, the sort who like to deduce intimate things about him based on his choice of subject—he was commenting on those who mistake the author for the characters he writes about.

Disch: People can do that in real life too. People can spend a week on vacation and come away with an equivalent mixed bag of misconceptions. They can also get it right. Having read a book doesn't guarantee that you've understood me, but having read the book correctly there's a strong supposition that you've taken many of my meanings and know a lot about who I am. When I meet people who have read things of mine I very quickly get a sense of how sympatico we'll be in relationship to whether they seem to have understood my work the way I understand it. If they do understand it the way I understand it, if what they say seems on target rather than offtarget, there's a good likelihood that we'll understand each other as people quickly and expeditiously. I think the body of a writer's work is a fair indication, not of everything about who he is, for many writers conceal a lot of themselves in their work or misrepresent themselves. I'm no different. An interesting thing about knowing writers is finding out the ways in which they create a public persona different from the person you meet.

Last Wave: Harlan also wrote about meeting Isaac Asimov for the first time and expecting to see a six foot eight ubermench

Disch: It's a misunderstanding. For one thing, Harlan isn't a close reader of other people's works. He's an enjoyer, and an enthusiast, but if he likes something he loses himself into it directly. I wouldn't expect him to make that kind of assessment. I think you have to be more suspicious of the world in general, in order to start being a psychologist. Harlan misrepresents himself for dramatic purposes, and Harlan is indeed, now that he's a grownup, a pretty shrewd reader. I've seen him working in writing classes where he's encountering somebody he doesn't know at all, and he instantly begins to interpret on the basis of a botched story personal elements of that person's life of which Harlan knows nothing. So of course, he's misrepresenting his own modus operandi. Harlan has this special relationship with his audience where he's the world's worst flirt. He demands adulation and attention more than any other writer. I've been with him when he's been writing something, and every three pages he would summon everyone in the house to hear the latest three pages from the typewriter, needing the reassurance that the audience existed, that it was there, that it would clap, that it responded, and liked him. His writing in show windows. Who's ever thought of such a thing? Only someone whose relationship to his audience is a primal experience.

Last Wave: There's a Nabokov line to the effect that showing people your rough drafts is like passing around a cup of your saliva.

Disch: That's funny! But I do it. I certainly have the same hunger for attention and applause. Even for rough drafts. I'm constantly calling up friends and saying, "Hey, you've got to hear this one" or "What do you think of this?" You can carry it to an excess and it could become a vice, but people like to communicate. It's a natural thing to do. If you didn't want people to hear it sooner or later, you wouldn't be writing it. Reading the first draft is just sooner.

Last Wave: In your stories you've had many homosexual characters, the most recent being Bing Anker in *The Businessman,*

but in your interviews you seem to have skirted around talking about it. In an interview in which you were asked about alienation, your answer towards the interviewer was that "very few married men with children complain about alienation." Since you don't have children and are not likely to, I didn't see that as a complete answer to the interviewer's question. Being gay, do you have a sense of alienation, does it come from your sexual preference, did that sense of being different affect you becoming a writer?

Disch: I would say that alienation is a function more of being young and unconnected with the world in general, professionally, emotionally, and in just having a sure sense of your own identity, than a question of homosexuality or heterosexuality. I came to my own sexual identity rather late in life, I'd say about age 27. It was a bit of a surprise to me, in that I fell in love. Love is always a surprise, and in this case, it was a shortlived happy surprise, because it was as they say a tragic love affair, or rather, it was soon unrequited. But I would have to say that on the whole my sexual experience has been one to mellow me out and reconcile me to the world, rather than to alienate me.

Last Wave: It's just that in answer to that interviewer's question you didn't say, "No, I'm not alienated" or "Yes, I am alienated," you said, "very few married men with children." That was your answer to the question, and knowing you I know that's not a yes or no answer, which made me think…

Disch: I wouldn't associate it to me in my life. It certainly is in lots of other lives one reads about, but I've never had any problems as a homosexual. I haven't been rejected by my family. I haven't lost jobs or even felt jobs being threatened.

Last Wave: In terms of the writing, had it been a hindrance at all, or has no one cared since you're sending in pieces of paper in the mail.

Disch: Homosexuality hadn't been something I've written about a lot. I don't define myself as an angry homosexual, protesting

injustices to homosexuals. It would be hypocrisy for me to do so, for that hasn't been a central experience in my life. I'm just not a protester for radical causes. People who make a political career out of complaining about a private injustice are wasting their lives on toothaches. The thing to do is go to the dentist if you've got a toothache. If you've got a problem in your life, solve it. In New York, homosexuals are rather advantaged than otherwise. They can afford the preposterous rents because they don't have families. The homosexuals that I've known, as a statistical group, tend to be rather more fortunate or better positioned socially than men of the same age who would be trying to put together a family. You wouldn't do that in Manhattan, it's a real difficulty. What happens is that you get to know a world that isn't representative of America at large. I'm quite capable of having, I suppose, paranoid feelings about the rest of the country, *vis a vis* being homosexual. But whenever I've visited people I've had very little static. Maybe it's because I come already as an established writer and some people are already friendly in advance. I mean, I'm seldom even snubbed for it.

Last Wave: I've talked with editors who've spoken about writers who've had sex change operations, for instance, and they'd gag and shiver and say, "I would never, could never purchase anything from that person." The idea of a different orientation just made them ill, and colored their ability to look objectively at a story. I'm wondering if anything like that had ever happened to you?

Disch: I'm sure that there are homophobic editors who've turned my work down automatically on understanding that I'm gay. I understand that that exists in the world. But they are not so much in charge of things that it has been a prevailing force in my life. I'm rather conservative myself I think, as homosexuals go. I don't think I can be said to have lived a promiscuous life. Charlie and I have been together for fifteen years now, and we're homebodies. What is commonly called the gay lifestyle has not been part of my life. I've never been into a disco. That's not quite true, I have been, but I haven't *danced* there. And the respect in which there's activism among homosexuals, there are certain activist causes that are seeking to correct geniune injustices. But those injustices haven't impinged

on me directly. They are in the class of good causes I don't bother with personally, like ERA and Help for the Handicapped. There are hundreds of worthy causes that I don't personally do anything about. What else do you want to know about my relationship to homosexuality?

Last Wave: Just the relationship it has to writing...

Disch: There's probably an advantage in some respects, that of being at a certain distance. Every writer preserves a beneficial distance from other people's lives, from life as it's generally led, and that allows him to look at things cooly, objectively, with a certain perspective, a bunch of adjectives that can lead to the word you started off with, alienation. But not in the sense that one is necessarily out of sympathy with what is going on. Only in that because you don't *share* certain things that other people take for granted you have to examine them and look at them more closely, an intellectual attention that other people are spared, because the problem never arises as a problem. So for certain homosexual writers, like Gore Vidal, there's a kind of intellectual and analytical approach to the human situation, second nature to an intellectual homosexual. E. M. Forster is another, more easy to see in the past, whose cool view of life was certainly reinforced by his situation as a homosexual.

Last Wave: Do you think that as a generality, writers to begin with have that step removed in which they intellectualize things, and that this is just a compounding of it?

Disch: It's a function of learning to use language as a professional tool. It's built into language, though. There's no difference between thought and using language well. It's all the same.

Last Wave: George Orwell would agree.

Disch: Many linguistic philosophers make the same equation, that thought is only using language well. Physiological psychologists who deal with two brains, would say that there are functions of

thought that are not linguistic and are nevertheless highly structured. I think that becoming a professional user of language requires learning to achieve that distance of thoughtfulness.

Last Wave: In "The Asian Shore" you have your protagonist travelling to another country specifically for that purpose, feeling that you must cut yourself from the other aspects of your life, the distractions, and get to a place where you can think.

Disch: That story is about the danger of carrying that process too far. You have to alternate back and forth. Abstract statements always end up, for me, my abstract statements, in ever gooier mud, where distinctions become more and more impalpable. But isn't it very Hegelian and a correct philosophical position to insist that meaningful statements can only be generated out of successive contradictions? That's Godel's proof, that you can't have a system of mathematics that does not incorporate a contradictory element which element allows the system to be generated. Any set of abstractions that I come up with, I always find myself saying, "Yes, but," and finding the necessity of contradicting what I said, as to the advantage of alienation and the necessity for a writer, "Yes, but." "Yes, but" is what happens in "The Asian Shore" if you carry that too far, so what I said about my middle aged wisdom is the conventional wisdom of the middle way. Nothing to excess, if you swerve to the right you'd better sort of correct with a swerve to the left. It's a dull philosophy, because it suggests only that you're playing it safe. But it even so may be true.

Last Wave: So rather than discussing the philosophical aspects behind the books do we let them all stand for themselves?

Disch: Oh, no, I'm always willing to say what any one of them may mean. I love to interpret myself. The problem is I'm at such a distance from the work. Chip's advantage, the reason for doing that particular approach of interpreting every line and saying what that line means is that you really are attached to what the writer did, to the text, where at a distance of several years, even the writer himself has only a very abstract precis of the book in his memory. I go back and

I read old things of mine and I'm astonished by them, or you read things of mine and I sit chuckling at my own lines, as though they were brand new. God bless forgetfulness.

Last Wave: You've said that you can't look back at your own work and enjoy it except for what it tells you about who you were, that they're so far removed from what you're doing now you can no longer enjoy them as stories. What do you think you'll be able to say in twenty years when you sit down and read your current work. *The Businessman*, for instance?

Disch: Oh, I'll like that one. What I like about *The Businessman* right now is that it has an allegorical dimension that is really very simple and nice. Every figure in it, Berryman and Bing and Joy-Anne, and each one of the characters has a very clearcut allegorical function. You can say, ah, this one represents this, as a fictional symbolic schema that is at the same time appearing to be just a story without symbolic meanings. It bears pondering, that's what I mean by allegory, that you can look at the plot and say, "What did it mean for this to happen?" "Why did this thing happen to this particular person?" and how much of the details can be brought to bear and illuminated—each character, each element of the allegory. In great allegory, like Dante, every detail, every phrase, is a function of the larger allegorical meaning.

Last Wave: Do you feel you have such control that everything was chosen rather than...

Disch: I wouldn't say chosen consciously, because the book was written very much in a state of each little chapter of inspiration. The difficulty in writing the book was always to hold off plunging full steam ahead, to wait until I had a new bright idea for the next chapter, a new shift of gears, a new change of direction, a new way of speeding thing up. I kept rejecting chapters that I had done and saying, "No, that's not surprising enough." I wanted it to be as fast as it could be; all of my interest was in creating pace and surprise. I wasn't thinking of what it meant at all. In fact, I was constantly thinking of things that contradicted my ideas of what was logical to

happen next. When I look back now on the book that resulted from all that (and it is full of surprise, narratively) to me, what I like in it now is the feeling that everything is in balance in terms of it being a single statement about—I don't know what it's about. The difficulty with allegory is always to say finally what it attaches to. With Dante you can. Bunyan is so mechanical I don't think he's good allegory.

Last Wave: If the importance of allegory is this total control, I'm wondering about the project you're working on right now, the interactive novel, in which anytime anyone sits down and "reads" it, it will tell a different story. I'm wondering how you can exercise the same degree of control as to the story you tell, what you feel you're doing with it and what you're getting out of it.

Disch: It's a different experience, but the user's freedom is, as in life, largely an illusion. So that in my control over the elements of the interactive game, I don't control the order, but I control what is actually said. That's the chief thing. It's the statement that you make. I'm creating a field in which there's not a linear narrative. It's rather a field of possibilities in which you can move, where all of those possibilities are declarations that I'm making. And if I'm thinking about how to put those together, it's not that different from writing a collection of short poems in which the order in which the poems appear isn't that important.

Last Wave: Going back to what we were talking about before, where I was quoting Nabokov saying that the lowest form of appreciation of a work is the one in which you're having the vicarious thrill of actually being the character, isn't that what this is, where the user *is* the character?

Disch: You're saying no, you use the word you instead of I or he, but...

Last Wave: This is taking the steps towards vicarious appreciation one step further...

Disch: No, I think actually that the player of one of these games is more distanced from the daydreaming aspect, because he's constantly having to solve little puzzles about the language that you're going to use to make the computer understand you. You're constantly stopping and starting and interrupting the flow of what would be daydreaming in a novel so I think that the result of this is to create a reader who is more alert to nuances of the text. For one thing he has to read slowly (you can't create a succession of events that is going to make the words on that screen go as fast as most skim readers) and you're always looking for clues to pick up for your own language back to the computer, which again, makes you read more carefully than speedreaders habitually do. So in some respects, this work lends itself more to the kind of writing that I do in terms of the kind of attention I ask to be given to it, which is a close and careful attention.

Last Wave: You would not have been able to write such a novel ten years ago.

Disch: Who would have thought to write such a novel? The machinery didn't exist.

Last Wave: But you could have done it if you'd wanted to by writing at the bottom of each page, "If you choose A turn to page X if you choose B turn to..."

Disch: But it's not a novel. It's something else. It's a genuinely different form.

Last Wave: What should we call it?

Disch: I've called it microfiction.

Last Wave: When it is done and released, how do you hope it will be reviewed? As a game or as a novel in book reviewing columns?

Disch: It truly baffles me.

Last Wave: Will *Games* write about it? Or will they review it in *Fantasy and Science Fiction?*

Disch: I doubt it. I would be pleased to have whatever attention, but whoever reviews it, if they're reviewing it in terms of existing expectations, they're coming at it wrong. This is a genuinely new artform. Its possibilities are different. Its pleasures are different. You can fuck up differently doing it. And nobody knows yet what those possibilities or those potential fuck ups are. It's like being D. W. Griffith, and having a camera put in your hands, and being told, "Here, see what you can do with this," and nobody's yet invented the closeup, and nobody knows how to edit film. Everybody's saying, "What you've got here is basically that you want to film a stage play," and D.W. Griffith says, "No, no, this is going to be different" but he doesn't know to call it movies. What doesn't exist yet is the word "movies" for interactive fiction. That word will come. I don't know what it will be. But interactive fiction is at least as different from novels as movies are from stageplays. At least that different, probably more so.

Last Wave: But you are treating this as a serious project?

Disch: Oh, certainly! It's nice to be a pioneer. It's a very lightweight piece of work in terms of emotion or the allegorical senses that I was talking about in *The Businessman*. In that respect it's going to be crude, because the problems simply of dealing with the formal demands of the thing have meant that I have had to reduce the loadbearing capabilities of the structure to very light dimensions.

Last Wave: So you want us to look at the restrictions on this in the same way we'd look at a sonnet and not complain that it only has a certain number of lines or syllables per line.

Disch: I don't suppose I'll have the same audience at all. I don't suppose literary people are going to be interested in interactive fiction except as something that they might be able to dismiss in a quick essay as a sign of how we're all becoming mechanized and alienated. That's the take of the literary establishment.

Last Wave: It's the author who will lend the fo m weight, though. I'm sure if Norman Mailer sat down and wrote an interactive novel tomorrow it would be reviewed on the cover of the *New York Times Book Review Section.*

Disch: Well, I don't think he could.

Last Wave: We're not talking about talent here. I'm just saying, if he did it would be treated seriously.

Disch: Yes, but I'm not generally dealt with as a serious writer. In fact, I don't like talking about "serious" fiction. Most people who use "serious" in a "serious" way are defending class privilege.

Last Wave: Are you talking about Updike and Cheever when you say "serious"?

Disch: Not them, they're good writers. And they're not promoting themselves as "serious" writers. But the people who *teach* Updike and Cheever in classes in modern fiction or review them in the *New York Times* think of them writing serious fiction, and what they mean is that these books have a canonical status, that they have moral intentions loftier than entertainment literature, that they are art, which also usually excludes the sense of playful or i everence. Seriousness is a curse. It's a way of saying "sacred turf, people stay away, we own this here in academia."

Last Wave: But you find that more in the interpreters, the Leslie Fiedlers rather than—

Disch: No, Fiedler would be against "serious." He's made some of the best critical cases for viewing that claim as bullshit. I once gave my usual speech about how I hated "serious" literature and somebody asked me, "Well, what are you going to call it, how will you make the distinction between what we understand as serious and what we understand as not serious?" and I said: "Good and bad." *That's* the division to make. And that's a valid division. You look at

what's there, you see what it intended, and if it's something worth intending and it does it well, that's good, and if it's not worth intending or it doesn't do it well or both, it's bad. You can have beef bourgignon, and it can be good or bad, but one isn't serious beef and the other not.

Last Wave: On rereading *Getting Into Death* I saw that you organized the stories alphabetically so as a result I was reading "The Master of the Milford Altarpiece" before the stories it referred to, such as "Slaves." I was wondering what your intention was in doing it that way.

Disch: There's a book of poetry that's organized even more willfully that way, called *ABCDEFGHIJKLMNPOQRSTUVWXYZ.* So partly there's a deliberate delight in the alphabet itself. I was a library page for many years in high school, and your chief work as a library page is to arrange things alphabetically. With my books it was a way of defying the alternative conventional arrangement, which is chronological. A chronological arrangement implies that the drama of the author's life is somehow the ordering principle for his *oeuvre.* An alphabetical arrangement says, "No, each of these works has its autonomous integrity, and any arrangement is arbitrary. These just happen to be together here, and any order will do and so why not an alphabetical one?" Having made that decision I can play with it including or excluding certain poems, but that's what the basic decision and its implications is.

Last Wave: There's then the third method which would be to arrange them in such a way as you'd hang paintings in museums where you'd choose how the mood of one story would flow into another, which is how you've arranged your other anthologies.

Disch: And in effect that's not missing, because what you can do is change titles and include or exclude certain things. I mean, if you want a touch of color between two darks...in the poetry books I wrote a few poems to fill in gaps in the alphabet.

Last Wave: And I'm sure there'll be many critics who will sit down and say that the reason you wrote those particular poems was some great inspiration.

Disch: Well, those shouldn't contradict.

Last Wave: Robert Frost wrote "The Road Not Taken" to chide a laggard friend who could never make up his mind. He wrote it as a nasty thing, mailed it off to his friend, and received a letter back exclaiming that it was a masterpiece. The reason for the inspiration itself in the end doesn't really matter, the work has to stand on its own, and will.

Disch: And I agree, too.

Last Wave: You wrote a novella "White Fang Goes Dingo" which you lengthened into a novel which was published in the U.S. as *Mankind Under The Leash* and in England as *The Puppies of Terra.* Were these title changes artistically amenable to you, or was it only for marketing considerations?

Disch: I wanted the title *The Puppies of Terra.* I thought that was a charming title. Don Wolheim is into bondage, and he always put men in chains on the covers (I mean, he's the discoverer and publisher of John Norman), so the title *Mankind Under the Leash* was the result. I don't think it represented the book's whimsical or comic thrust. But what could I do? I had a standard Ace contract. He had the right to make that change. To give him credit, he didn't actually rewrite the novel. He had a benign indifference toward what you actually wrote as long as it didn't exceed the length required. Phil Dick did not have his novels butchered by Wolheim so long as they came in at the length that was required. If they were longer, they would just have an arm or a leg chopped off summarily, but there wasn't any fiddling with the prose, so what I actually wrote was what was actually published, except for the title.

Last Wave: This is really, as far as I can tell, the only shorter piece which you have expanded to greater length.

Disch: No. *Echo Round His Bones* was based upon an unpublished novellette of forty pages which was much too skeletal in its execution. It really amounted to a synopsis. *The Businessman* actually started off as a short story that was never published called "Glandier's Wife," and never will be published because it's a terrible story, but it had the germ of the ghost pregnancy and the demonic child. In the original case the child wasn't the little horror that he is in this, nor was the husband. There was just the aspect of the wife's ghost becoming pregnant and the husband having to deal with a child who's half real. That idea haunted me for years and years and years...

Last Wave: Since when?

Disch: Oh, that goes back to '64, I think.

Last Wave: Have you ever been tempted to expand upon any of your other things?

Disch: Not usually, because usually I'm very happy with a story that's written. Sometimes I'm uncertain whether a thing has the growth potential of a novel. So when I was beginning *On Wings of Song* I wasn't certain that that was going to be a novel for maybe the first fifteen or twenty pages. 'Cause I didn't write that with a whole outline in mind. I had the idea, and I just moved into the story. And I'm doing one right now called *Eternity*, which I suspect is going to be a short story, but it could be a novel. There's the possibility there. And as I'm writing it, I'm trying to make it as large as I can, because as large as a thing can be is a good idea no matter what length it is. You get that same feeling of fullness in a good short story as in a novel. Fullness isn't a question of size, it's whether you get it to the rim.

Last Wave: You let the things find their own proper length rather than sitting down and saying, "Now I will write a short story or a novel."

Disch: Sometimes. Sometimes I know that what I have isn't a situation, a field of possibilities, but I have a plot idea that's going to have an absolutely certain length, like "Josie and the Elevator." Once I had that story I knew just how long that would go, within minutes of thinking of it. I knew about how long that would be. But other times you have a situation that could be amplified to any length. An example, and one similar to *Eternity,* is Philip Farmer's *Riverworld* series, which in its very nature could go to any length, because basically it's a question of how much fun can you have combining and recombining all of your favorite characters in history and literature. That could go on as long as the phantasmagoria of the premise continues to entertain you.

Last Wave: I've noticed a love of innocence in your work, a Peter Pan type attitude. As long ago as "102 H-Bombs" in 1965, you wrote: "that was the definition of being an adult: that you couldn't see the way out." Just a few years ago you wrote in "The Grownup" of a situation where childhood seems to be the best thing, and then we wake sadly to be grownups, and you do use children a fair amount of the time. I was wondering how you see yourself in relationship to that.

Disch: It's lovely to be able to move into that frame of mind. "The Brave Little Toaster" is probably my best sustained adventure in innocence. I think it's something everybody loves. Usually the difficulty for artists in writing about innocence is that it moves into a kind of Shirley Temple type of sentimentality and cute darling falsifications. Getting the tone of children is difficult, because they're not nice necessarily. It's not that children don't have tempers and the capabilities of being perfect little monsters. The latest child is the one in *The Businessman,* and he's the monster in the book. Part of the interest of childhood is that children are amoral. In Bradbury it's the same, his children are divided between the little monsters and the sweethearts. The fun of Bradbury when he's good is that there's the same charm to the children whether they're good children or bad children, like the children in "The Veldt" who have the lions eat their parents? They're just as nice children as the children in his dreadful book *Something Wicked This Way Comes,* which makes the myth

of childhood become mawkish and sentimental. But that's not to say that the only interesting children are wicked children, because of course there are nice ones too. It's just a different way of looking at things, and it's one that writers generally have. I'm certainly not alone in wanting to write about children and feeling happy with Peter Pannish feelings. Although I don't think there's anything in Hemingway that could be compared to that. If you're macho I guess you don't enjoy children. At least I can't think of anything in Hemingway.

Last Wave: Tying this innocence together with the joyfulness I spoke of earlier, because by innocence I don't just mean childhood here but sort of an outlook, again, I wonder why there's the misinterpretation of your work as being despairing, depressing, saddening, when most of it is in fact the other way around, being a sort of celebration of things, of what people are and what they can do and how they interrelate. Why is it that there is this misinterpretation in readers and critics?

Disch: The simplest reason is envy. Do you know a better?

Last Wave: I don't mean just the way people react badly when you say: "Well, we must have standards here," and they say: "Go away, we just want to write ray blaster science fiction." I'm questioning the misreading of the intention.

Disch: Why do fundamentalist believers in religion dislike rock and roll? Why do they consider it wicked and an agent of devilish powers? Because it awakens their bodies to unexpected life. Bright ideas do the same thing to the mind, and to minds that are frozen into certain self-defensive postures, whether ideological or imaginative. If certain imaginative possibilities are denied to the mind and then they are awakened, it always feels like a vampire awakening. It's always something you're afraid of. Because the experience challenges the equilibrium of the rather icy structure of a settled emotional attitude. Will you buy that?

Last Wave: To deal with a specific example, why is it I read *On Wings of Song*, I see a happy ending, I see an apotheosis, I see the character surviving, although on a different plane, and I'll talk to someone else about the book, and they'll see Daniel Weinreb dead at the end, having never flown, and see it as a depressing ending. Why that split?

Disch: It's not the ending. They're taking their unconscious sum of the meaning of the book as they've moved along reading it, as you have in making a happy ending of it. It really is delicately balanced for the choice to be made. If the negative choice has been made it means that the spectrum of ways of thinking about life that the novel has presented to the reader is inimical to them. As it would be to many people, if you offered them that world for them to live in. Some people maybe are just literalists and they think that if a story ends with an ending that isn't conventionally a happy ending, marriage, riding off into the sunset, whatever... I remember a Spider Robinson review said something about a story of mine that the ending was a great cheat, which seems strange in that the presumption was there that I *promised* him a rose garden. But basically, what he was saying was that the agreement that was understood to exist between a reader and a writer is one in which the daydream will lead to a certain pleasant exit and you shut the door and you get the closure of forgetfulness. The book stunned, and the ending didn't allow him to forget being stunned. That's how I would explain it. But I don't think in most of those cases that the description of the experience is one that they've thought much about, or that bears much argument. I think it's rather a way of dismissing it, and saying that they'd rather not deal with it at all. Forgotten. Gone. Nihilist.

Hologram Crackers

BY ERNEST HOGAN

"I can't keep it from you any longer. Harold, I'm leaving you to join the Peace Guard."

"No, Nelda! Tell me it isn't true!"

DING!

Hey, what is this? Right during the important part!

"This is a General Hologram Override."

Oh.

"Uh, your attention please, and don't panic!"

Who's panicking?

"I'm Robbie of the Public Information Service, with an important message."

If I wanted this, I'd watch the news!

"Uh, early this morning, the guy you see here...."

What a slob! That not a Chicano haircut!

"....Iggy Hernandez, escaped from the Valley Boulevard Prosocial Reprogramming Center. He was convicted for drawing and distributing antisocial comic books, and should be considered extremely dangerous, but don't panic..."

I'm not!

"....our high-powered Deputy Dogs are sniffing out his trail! If you see him...."

Fat chance of that!

"....report him."

Unless, of course, he comes right through my room. I never go outside.

"Thank you."

POP!

"We now return to our regular programming..."

Good!

"....but first, this important message."

It figures.

"Here's an American nuclear bomb, vaporizing a section of the ice cap in Antarctica...."

Wow! It looks like a giant, open air steam room!

"....leaving another vast expanse of this, the last virgin continent on the planet, unveiled, so your Peace Guard strip mining crews can start digging up the raw material of modern living.

"Yes, your Peace Guard is turning the world upside-down to keep you on top!"

Hey, isn't that a dead penguin?

Oh good, back to "Maze of Our Times."

"Oh please, Nelda! Don't leave me! You know I can't take care of the plants, they'll die!"

That bitch Nelda!

"And without them, what will I eat?"

Poor Harold, uh, what?

"We interrupt this program to bring you an emergency speech from the President of the United States, on the Crisis Control Bureau's latest crisis. Don't panic."

Who's panicking? It's just another crisis.

"And now, people, direct from his anti-assassination capsule...."

I hope it's better than their last crisis, but how are they going to top a blizzard in L.A.?

"....Samuel Adamson, President of these United States."

But what about poor Harold, and the plants?

"Hello, gang! It's me again!"

He looks like a chromed garbage can in that thing!

"As we all know, Antarctica is the last virgin continent on Earth, and our only source of resources...."

At least for this crisis!

"....that are necessary for keeping our country turned on, and running smoothly. They must not be wasted!"

Oh no, not another energy crisis! What is this, nostalgia?

"So it is the duty of America to do everything short of destroying Antarctica...."

Wasn't Antarctica fully developed a few crises ago?

"....to save it from being raped by greedy foreign nations that would use these precious resources to support non-democratic governments, as well as deprive America of the raw material needed to keep the system flowing."

Would you hurry up?

"Honest, gang, this should be real CCB spectacular!"

Aw, come on!

ZZZZZZZZZZZZZAP!

Hey, who turned off my holovision? And the light? Why, this is barbaric! Leaving a poor unemp in a dark room, without holovision. Hell, I bet even the air conditioning is off! Sometimes I wonder what the world is coming to!

DING!

Oh, here comes an Emergency Hologram, maybe it'll explain....

"Hi there little unemp, don't be afraid, it's just your little old buddy, Mickey Mouth, taking a break from hosting 'Cartoon Conspiracy' to bring you this Emergency Specialized audience Message. Don't panic."

I'm not, Mickey!

"I realize that in your wait for the Human Employment Watch to find you a job, some of you are too busy keeping entertained to keep up with the news."

I know I really should, MIckey, but there are so many really good programs on these days...

"So you might not know that the plug has been pulled on the Unemp Home Program, in fact, after this temporary power blackout, we won't be able to turn this one on again."

Oh no! This time they've gone too far!

"But don't worry, all you evicted unemps now have 500 credits on your thumbs, to help you find your way in the outside world."

But after that runs out, I'll starve!

"So after I pop off, just follow the fluorescent arrows to the nearest exit, don't talk to non-holographic strangers...."

Of course not, all my friends are holograms.

"....be nice to the penguins, and good luck with your new independence."

POP!

And now I won't even have holovison! Boy, and I though Harold had it bad!

Oh well, I might as well leave.

The streets are sure empty, the snow's all melted and there's nothing around but a few wandering penguins. I wonder where everyone is? Inside watching holovision I bet!

What'll I do now? Hm, I know!

What time is it?

DING!

"This is Tommy Tick-Tock, and the time is thirteen eighty-one!"

POP!

Thirteen eighty-one? It's either awfully late for this time of day or they even put Tommy Tick-Tock on the blink.

And what now? Maybe I'll just walk around, and look at the penguins.

DING!

What?

"Hi, I'm Jill, it's thirteen eighty-four, and time for the latest Street Holograms."

The Street Holograms! I had completely forgotten about them! It's been so long since I've been on the streets. I guess they're better than nothing.

"Hi, I'm Sammy Snuburger!!"

So what's snu?

"Have you had your Standard Nutritional Unit today?"

No.

"If not, rush over to your local Sammy Snuburger's at—"

"The corner of Graphic and Anaconda."

Should I go? No, I'm not hungry yet. As the new old saying goes, "Let us eat hologram crackers!"

"This is Nora 100 Per Cent Natch, and people, we can't let the de-ication of Antarctica go on!"

So, what do you expect me to do?

"What I suggest is a people's re-ication program. Go to your refrigerator..."

I don't have one.

"....or local ice vending machine...."

I don't see any around here.

"....get a block of ice and mail it to Antarctica. It's the least you can do. Thank you."

Besides, I've only got 500 credits on the tip of my thumb and can't afford to waste any.

"Paid for by the National Endowment for Radical Holovision."

"And now for some equal time."

"We at your local post office have something to say to you."

What's that?

"Hellllllllllp!"

"Soggy packages of melting ice that will never make it to Antarctica are gumming up the works and water damaging your mail. Just look at this mess!"

Yuk!

"So stop this waste of a vital resource! Keep American ice in America!"

Now here comes my kind of commerical!

"Life got you down?"

You bet!

"What you need is to plug into the wonderful world of holovison!"

Yeah!

"The quality of life may be deteriorating, but holovision is better than ever! And the best and biggest selection of new and used H-V sets is at my place, Herbie's House of Holovision, at 597 Zanzibar Street, in Azusa. Go there now!"

I hear and I obey!

"And this is the end of our latest selection of Street Holograms. We hope we have entertained as well as informed you. Bye, now!"

POP!

Now, off to the House of Holovision.

I've made it! And that must be Herbie.

"Hiya friends! This is your friend and mine, Herbie Worth, welcoming you to the fabulous Herbie's House of Holovision."

He must be pre-recorded.

"With the whole world going hologram crackers, holovision is more than a lifestyle, and is rapidly replacing reality-as-we-know-it. So nothing but the clearest reception can be tolerated. So if your old window to the new world is blurring, or if you're a poor unfortunate who hasn't yet plugged in, step in. I'll be cloning around all over, and more than happy to help you and myself!"

I'll just go in then.

Excuse me, sir, are you Herbie?

"Yup, or at least one of me!"

And you're alive.

"Alive and cloning! You must want to buy something. Tell me, what are you?"

You, a bigot? At your age?

"You misunderstand, I mean credit-wise, what you have on your thumb!"

Oh, I'm an umemp.

"And you want the most for your 500 credits."

Well, yeah. I guess.

"Well, I believe I have what you wan...."

DING!

"What now?"

I think it's a General Hologram Override.

"This is a General Hologram Override."

See?

"This is Robbie, your PIS officer, sorry to interrupt you again, but remember that guy we told you about last time? Iggy Hernandez?"

Yeah, what about him?

"Well, here's a tape of him holding a penguin hostage and out-running some of our high-powered Deputy Dogs, after stealing a micro-loop containing part of the government's confiscated library of dangerous, mind polluting holograms!"

Boy, would I like to see that!

"We don't know what he's planning to do with them. He is a degenerate, desperate member of a minority group, you know, and it could mean disaster..."

And it could be awfully entertaining! I wonder if this is part of the crisis?

"....but don't panic!"

I'm not, damn it!

"I'll keep you up to date. Thank you."

POP!

"Now, where was I? Oh yeah...."

"Just go over to the pre-recorded me standing over there, and he'll show you what you want."

Okay!

"As you surely know, holovision is more than entertainment, it's a way of life, and life isn't just for the rich, so for you of lower incomes we have the Holohome 5 1/2. Its antenna is also a pop-up tent that doubles as a portable dwelling unit."

Wow!

"Go ahead, get in and take her out for a spin!"

Sure!

"Press the little button to turn it on, and the big one to change channels."

Okay!

CLICK!

"....you can join the minority group of your choice...."

CLICK!

"....ation of Antarctica had left thousands of penguins homeless. Now, the government has brought many of these refugees to America, but it's not enough to let these poor creatures walk our streets, friends. It's up to you to adopt a penguin, take him into your home, make him part of your famil...."

CLICK!

I can't support a penguin! I can't even afford to eat!

"....people died in the fire at the Working Singles Dwelling Complex in El Monte. No one wanted to leave their holovi...."

CLICK!

I don't want the news!

"....ou can just outrun this high-powered Deputy Dog for six laps, you will win your own vacation spot, with resource rights, in beautiful Antarctica, soon to be steamed and greened after the radia...."

This is really neat! It's great to be back home!

ZZZZZZZZZZZZZAP!

Uh oh! We seem to be having one of those situations beyond our control!

"Hey, is this thing on? Uh...."

It's Iggy Hernandez, and he still had that penguin!

"Gimme a close up! Uh....."

What, no Chicano accent? He should watch Ethnic Accents on Channel 28 and learn how he should talk!

"Hello, Hololand, holo! This is Iggy Hernandez."

But I guess he's got the right to be part of any minority group he wants to be part of.

"I've taken over this holovison station...."

Are you going to show the stolen micro-loop? I hope so!

"....and I gotta important message!"

I sure wish I could remember which minority group I belong to.

"Despite what the censors are doing, what passes for reality in this society is obsolete, and I'm now gonna prove it by...."

He's going to do it! I'm going to see that micro-loop!

ZZZZZZZZZZZZZAP!

Hey!

CLICK!

CLICK!

CLICK!

Don't tell me it's another blackout!

DING!

"This is a General Hologram Override."

"Hi, this is Robbie again, and that was another blackout."

It figures.

"The CCB reports that their latest crisis is a success, has received excellent reviews and public reponse. So expect more blackouts in the next few days, which will overlap with the coming Food Shortage.

"And our high-powered Deputy Dogs got Iggy Hernandez...."

Damn! Now I won't get to see that micro-loop!

"....so there's no need to panic."

What are they worried about? Nobody panics these days!

"And in case you get hungry, open season has been declared on penguins."

That should come in handy.

"Thank you."

POP!

"And now back to 'You Stake Your Life'...."

It's about time!

"And it's also about time you've decided if you want this sensational Holohome 5 1/2!"

Yeah, I really do, Herbie.

"Well, then just put your thumb right here and let me take a load off of it!"

Gee! I never had this much credit on my thumb before, and now that it's gone, it still feels the same. Like I never had it.

"Yes, but you now have a Holohome 5 1/2."

"Yeah, and I love it!"

"I'm glad that you do, but I'm afraid that you'll have to take it outside now."

Oh yeah, sorry.

Hm, I'm beginning to get hungry. I wonder what I can do for food?

Out here in the street seems like a good enough place. There hasn't been any traffic since the Automobile Crisis. Nothing but an occasional penguin. And a guy and a high-powered Deputy Dog there.

Hey, the guy is Iggy Hernandez! And he's still holding that penguin.

"Well, I don't know. I'm a revolutionary. This would be like selling out."

"Not really, Mr. Hernandez. The CCB is the most revolutionary outfit in the world!"

Boy, am I hungry! I'm beginning to want food more than holovision!

"You? Revolutionary? Like hell! All you do is push people around!"

"Yes, we do push people around, but what revolution doesn't? Besides, that's not all we do. We don't try to impose our will on the people. We aren't out to preserve any kind of order. Everything we do leaves the world changed."

"But you still lead the people around like a pack of sheep! That always remains the same."

They did declare open season on penguins.

"We are openminded, Mr. Hernandez. We found your idea of broadcasting that confiscated micro-loop very interesting. It could cause some amusing changes. But, the way you handled things wasn't very...."

"There you go! You'll change everything around! Ruin it! Forget...."

"Oh no! You have it all wrong. We were thinking along the lines of preparing the public for it through a series of preceding crises. And also we could put you through a course in being a Chicano, have you talk with an accent, maybe have you call yourself Nacho instead of Iggy...."

"No way! You even want to change me! Look, I'm me, what I am! Sure, I'm a Chicano, but I don't have any accent! I don't even speak Spanish! And I go by Iggy, not Nacho!"

"Don't get excited, kid! Those were only suggestions, of course, we'll have to do a lot of talking about it, but this is your chance to really help change things! People, like that guy coming over to us, will live differently and you can influence how, if you work with us. If you don't, you'll just end up back in the Valley Boulevard Prosocial Reprogramming Center, and tell me, how are you going to change the world from in there?"

Excuse me, but did you want that penguin?

"Oh no. Here, take it!"

Thank you, and I hope you join the CCB. I'd really like to see that micro-loop!

"You see, Mr. Hernandez! If you don't give us a try all you'll be able to give him—the sort of person you're supposed to want to help—is one penguin, one meal! With us you can help feed his mind, change the world!"

"Aw, all right! I'll give it a try. I guess there are some things that can only be done from the inside, but don't expect me to be totally cooperative! If this turns out to be some kind of trick, I'm leaving!"

"Good, good! Your spirit will certainly be welcome!"

"We'll see about that, but one thing's for sure, nothing will be left the same."

"Yes, but does anything ever stay the same for very long?"

Let's see, I could kill the penguin by smashing its head against the pavement, but should I eat it raw, or try to find some way to cook it?

Letter From the South, Two Moons West of Nacogdoches

BY JOE R. LANSDALE

Dear Hawk:

Your letter stating that you can't believe I'm not a Baptist, due to the fact my morals and yours are so similar, astonishes me. How can you think only Baptist are good people and lead happy lives? You've known me longer than that, even if most of our contact has been through letters and phone calls.

Well, I might ask you the same in reverse. How can you accept such a silly pagan religion? And if you must consider a religion, why not look back to your heritage, instead of taking on a Hebrew mythology.

And how in the world can you believe being a Baptist makes you happier than others?

I'm quite happy, thank you. I mean I have my ups and downs, but from your cards and letters, our occasional phone calls, so do you. Don't we all?

In answering your question about why I don't believe more fully, I might add that I've been a student, if not a scholar, of religions all my life, and I find nothing to recommend the Baptist over any other religion, no matter what the origin. Only the Aztec and their nasty custom of human sacrifice could be worse, and I'll tell you, though it's off the subject, I think the old Chief of this country is crazy as hell to sell them the makings for a nuclear reactor. I don't care what sort of diplomatic gesture it was meant to be. Those

heart-cutters get up here on us and it's the last pow-wow, buddy. With just sticks and stones, practically, they ran the Spaniards off, so I sure don't want to see them with the ability to make the big shitty boom machine, if you know what I mean? They're tougher than us, I admit it. I say let's let our technology be our muscle, and not let those mean pyramid builders have an equalizer, because with their attitude about war and sacrifice, they're going to be a whole hell of a lot more equal than we are.

But that's off the point, as usual.

On to why I'm not a Baptist. Well, first off, let's keep this simple. Consult history text if you don't believe me, though that won't keep you from twisting them around to suit you, or from picking just those that say what you want them to say (I remember our argument before on the civil war with the Japs, and I've got to add, though I shouldn't bring it up again, how you can side at all with those bastards after what they've done to our people on the West Coast is beyond me), so perhaps my asking you to examine historical text isn't sound advice on my part, and you're sure to take it as an insult.

But history does show, Hawk, that John the Baptist was not the only religious nut running around at that time, and it was only fate that gave him the honor (a dubious one in my book) of becoming the "Messiah." I mean a dramatic death like decapitation and having the head put on a silver (does the text actually say silver, I can't remember and am too lazy to check?) platter, and then the fact that the execution was performed at the bidding of a dance hall floozy of the time, and the head presented to her as a gift, does have a certain element of showboating, and that's just the sort of thing people latch onto. High drama.

It always occurs to me that Jesus of Nazareth, mentioned briefly in your so-called "Holy Book" and I believe he was a cousin or something to John if memory serves me, was as likely a candidate for martyrdom as John. Except for fate, he might well have been the one your congregation worships.

He, however, in spite of his many similarities to John, had the misfortune to suffer less than a martyr's death. He was hit and killed by a runaway donkey cart and knocked up on the curbing with his,

how was it put in the book...? Can't remember, but something like "with his flanks exposed." Words to that effect.

I believe it was Jesus' inglorious death, more than anything else, that jockeyed him to a lowly position in the race toward Messiahism (did I make that word up?). He certainly had all the goods John did. Nice fanaticism, pie in the sky, promises of an afterlife, etc. But it seems to be in our natures to prefer bloody, dramatic demises such as decapitation to a relatively minor death by runaway donkey cart, the latter casualty being all the more jinxed by the fact that he ended up draped over some curb with his ass exposed, his little deep, brown eye winking at the world.

If we were more open-minded, a religion might have formed where Jesus was worshipped, and instead of the little bleeding head on a platter medallions many of your congregation wear, they might be adorning themselves with little buttocks with donkey cart tracks across them.

Just a thought. Don't get mad.

The other thing you mention is the Platter of Turin. And I admit to you that it is indeed mysterious and fascinating. But I've never seen nor read anything that convinces me that whatever is making itself manifest on the platter—and I also admit it does look like a head with a bleeding stump—is in fact, the likeness of John the Baptist. And even if it is his likeness, and somehow the trauma of his death caused it to be forever captured in the platter, that still does not mean he is the Messiah.

Consider the statue of Custer at the site of The Battle Of The Little Big Horn. Many have reported (and I believe it has been filmed) that it bleeds from the mouth, nose, ears and mouth from time to time. To some, this was interpreted to mean that Custer was a Saint and that the statue could cure illnesses. I know from our letters in the past that you hardly believe Custer a Saint, quite the contrary.

What I'm saying is this: there are many mysteries in the world, Hawk, and there are many interpretations. You need only choose a mystery and an interpretation to suit you.

Well, got to cut this short. Got to get dressed. There's a meeting tonight. They're having another public execution, and it's about time. Bunch of niggers are going to be crucified along Caddo Street and I don't want to miss that. Those stupid black bastards thinking

they're good as us makes me ill. I've had my hood and robes starched special for the occasion, and I'm actually getting to light one of the pitch-covered niggers placed at the end to provide light. I also get to lead the local Scout troops in a song. I'm excited.

Oh, almost forgot. If you haven't read about it, we finally got that troublemaker Martin Luther King, and he's the main feature tonight. I know from your letters that you have a sort of begrudging respect for him, and I must admit his guerilla activities conducted with only twenty-two men throughout the South have been brilliant for his kind. But after tonight he'll plague the South no more.

As I said, wish you could be here, but I know you've got a big pow-wow going up there and I wish I could see it. Like to see your tribe strip the skin off those White Eyes slow and easy. They're worse than our niggers, and I'm only glad the last of them (far as we know) have been eliminated down here.

Another thing just hit me about this Baptist business, and I'll go ahead and get it off my chest. Here we are getting rid of the whites and the niggers, and you and some others have adopted their silly religion. I admit that our own is pretty damned dumb (Great Heap Big Spirit, Ugh), but doesn't that kind of thing, accepting their religion, give the lowlifes a sort of existence through us? Think about it.

Guess while I'm bad mouthing them, might as well admit I'm against the trend that wants to drop all of their ways, as some of them would just be too difficult to adopt. This two moons and two suns bit is just ridiculous. With automobiles that method is no longer correct. What used to be a two day trip is now only a matter of hours. And this switch over from their language to ours, the use of Cherokee writing for all tribes, is going to be a pain. I mean we'll all be speaking our tribal languages, translating the writing to Cherokee and when we all get together how are we going to converse? Which language will we pick? Cherokee for writing, because of their good alphabet, makes sense, but which will be the superior tribal language, and how's it going to go down with folks when one is chosen over all the others?

Oh to hell with it. This old gal is going to have to get to stepping or she isn't going to have time to get dressed and moving.

Best to you,

Running Fox

(For Mignon Glass)

Reveleven

BY MARK W. TIEDEMANN

Hot summer. Shimmering chimeras off broken tarmac. Gushing hydrants, dogs barking at half naked kids dancing.

There were 95 Seven-Elevens in our city.

They began doing small order printing. Pamphlets, reports, posters—anything bigger than a postage stamp and smaller than a chalkboard. We kids thought it was great. We'd run in, giggling, getting 8 1/2 x 11 stacks of Michael Jackson or Indiana Jones. Later we saw personalized business cards: Goodtime Daddy by Appointment, or Hubcap Redistribution On Commission. Then a few neighborhood organizations began printing their newsletters at Seven-Eleven. Nice. Convenient. Cheap enough, too: free. The shops were open 24 hours a day, so whenever the urge hit you, you could mass produce it. For free they undercut the printshops. Rare instance when something at Seven-Eleven cost less.

Political posters began appearing.

Then church groups did some.

Arguments and debates raged on telephone poles and in the windows of empty stores, handed out in pamphlet form. Many were funny. We read them all. Some weren't so funny.

Someone did a beautiful number on a local committeewoman who was sleeping with the 15 year old son of a neighborhood merchant. Lord, we *laughed!* Someone else followed it up with an ad for three enterprising young college girls who needed the money for school. Hot words, good times. The committeewoman threatened a law suit, but resigned anyway.

Investigations were started by important people. Someone had to be subsidizing Seven-Eleven. In a month we looked like Las Vegas without the neon or Red Square without the oppression.

The National Decency League picketed Seven-Elevens in another town. The shops wouldn't stop selling certain magazines.

In a parking lot a drug deal went down in the lazy sweltering twilight. Limousines, sunglasses. No one saw, no one cared—apparently. The next morning photographs of it were all over town courtesy of the new Seven-Eleven Letter. A state representative stepped down.

The police were divided. City Hall didn't like it, the cops on the beats did.

"Why don't we bust the other guys? Where are the warrants?"

Silence from the courts, ominous grumblings.

A lit bottle, light in the darkness, tossed through glass. The cookies and cupcakes turned to charred dust, plastic wrappers melted. No one was happy. We gathered round outside, orange-lit dark faces howling insane rage. No one brought marshmallows.

Next to the Seven-Eleven Letter appeared reprints of Kerouac and Ginsberg. Heavy dudes. On the cash registers could be read the Bill of Rights.

An old man two streets over ran off a thousand copies of his own book, a picture guide to politics for kids. We liked the pictures, thought they were funny. Seven-Eleven had other comics, but those cost a dollar, these were free.

The regional manager was shot nine times in his car as he prepared to go home one night. The posters for a long time dripped anger. My sister brought home a photo of the man and cried.

Seven-Eleven did t-shirts, too. We wore our sentiments, bold, bright, and cere against the drab streets. Music bounced.

Additions were built to the cheery little redroofed buildings.

Buscaglia, Sartre, Wittgenstein, and Sagan sat racked with the romances in the rotary bookshelves.

"I don' unnerstan' dis, man."

Classes were opened that summer. A dollar a session, come on in, learn some things. Carpentry, gardening, philosophy. By August the bigger classes—same price—were held in the neighborhood Y.

Lorenz, Chomsky, Reich. Some parents grumbled concerned grumblings.

Lumber stacked behind the dumpsters on the parking lot under canvas tents. Hammers and saws, hesitant at first, soon filled the still autumn air. I wasn't in school, were you?

We'd rent the tools. One kid we knew tried to keep his. We caught him and tried to convince him to return them, but he wouldn't. Beat his ass. Beat his ass good.

Seven-Eleven sold paint.

And lacquer.

Also insulation.

How-to books were loaned out, printed on steel-hard plastic.

"Where's the funding coming from? I suggest we ought to look into possible foreign involvement."

We made effigies of senators, knifed them, burned them.

Campaigns began to elect pro-Seven-Eleven politicians.

Seven-Eleven recycled: plastic, aluminum, steel, old toys, books, newspapers, posters, records, poverty.

"All dese years dey jus' been waitin'." My father had a dreamy look in his eyes.

Seven-Eleven recycled old beds.

When they began distributing birth control—information and methods—some citizen groups protested. It looked like a court battle. I was anxious.

Proust, Boccaccio, Machiavelli.

I worshipped the Prince.

The streetsheets (we called the posters and pamphlets that) did vast things to pious people. Pickets appeared, ours and theirs.

Inane words in dayglow red across buildings: Jesus will get you!

The Bible appeared in the racks. King James, Revised Standard, Good News for Modern Man, New Jerusalem, Concordance, Catholic.

Satisfied clergy patted air, said "Now wait, maybe..."

The Koran, The Vedas, Siddharta, Bhagavad-Gita, the Necronomicon.

"Stop it!"

Elections built mountains, flooded valleys. Tectonic politics.

Seven-Eleven Letter was joined that winter by the Government Forum. Snow fell, we read. Seven-Eleven would deliver: pizzas, milk, medicines, books. They recycled and redistributed food and clothes.

They got a credit union started by spring to help old people. A daycare center helped welfare mothers and they found jobs, too.

Public meetings were held in the shops. No one was excluded. I listened in wonder to human process.

We cooperate best when everybody thinks it's their idea.

The chief of police fell. A big axe, cut him off at the roots. A lot of branches came down, too.

Dreiser, Nin, Lawrence, Sandburg.

Seven-Eleven did computer processing for individuals.

Five stores burned one night, broken glass, blood, thirteen bodies.

July. Heat rose, patience fell. Clerks got badges, guns.

We read Jefferson and Paine, Marx and Voltaire. I found Hesse and Huxley.

You should see my house. New porch, new storm windows, new panelling. I'm going to be a carpenter when I grow up and I'll *bet* you, sucker, I live past thirty-three!

Power subsidies are going through for senior citizens and poor families. Heat and cool, heat and cool.

Bright colors, let me see the sunshine make us bright colors!

The public school system is going to adopt the Seven-Eleven method. Maybe I'll go back.

Money changes hands, power shifts and tumbles about, altering focus, bringing clarity. I am complex, but now I understand. Posters of Michael have vanished. I have a new one of Vivaldi. It hangs beside John, Paul, George and Ringo, below one of Einstein. On the opposite wall, beside one of Delany, is one of my own creation:

"The source of freedom is dreams, the power of freedom is imagination."

Seven-Eleven sells passive solar and active solar. They have also begun building windmills. The utilities bitch like spoiled children with no sugar. Tough. Seven-Eleven banners flutter in the parks.

Accusations of conspiracy, corruption, decay are unheard against the rising wall we build. Politicians suck in their mouths, lemon-

puckered, unplugged tape decks where once we thought resided minds.

Few stay indoors in my neighborhood anymore. The streets are good to look at. Our Seven-Eleven rep to the board of aldermen is pushing for more allocations for repairs; give us money for materials, we'll do the work ourselves, thank you. The asphalt cracks like desert mud after winter.

My sister has three lovers. There's a girl in my Seven-Eleven classes who looks at me with promise. By next spring I'll be ready, but perhaps she won't wait.

All current legislation is posted at the local Seven-Eleven, on a board above the ice cream. You can go in and read it 24 hours a day.

Maybe next year a jobs program will develop. I have ideas.

We sit on the corner, drinking our icy sodas. It's hot and my body runs with small rivers.

"I'm going to get another soda," my friend says.

"Go to the gas station this time," I say. "Damn things cost a quarter more at Seven-Eleven!"

Some things resist change effectively.

"000-00-0000"
MICHAEL BISHOP

"Supreme Court Decisions"
DAVID J. SHESKIN

"America, America, America"
BRUCE BOSTON

AN INTERVIEW WITH THOMAS M. DISCH

"Hologram Crackers"
ERNEST HOGAN

"Letter From The South,
Two Moons West of Nacogdoches"
JOE R. LANSDALE

"Reveleven"
MARK W. TIEDEMANN