

Summer 1998

#88

SPACE AND TIME

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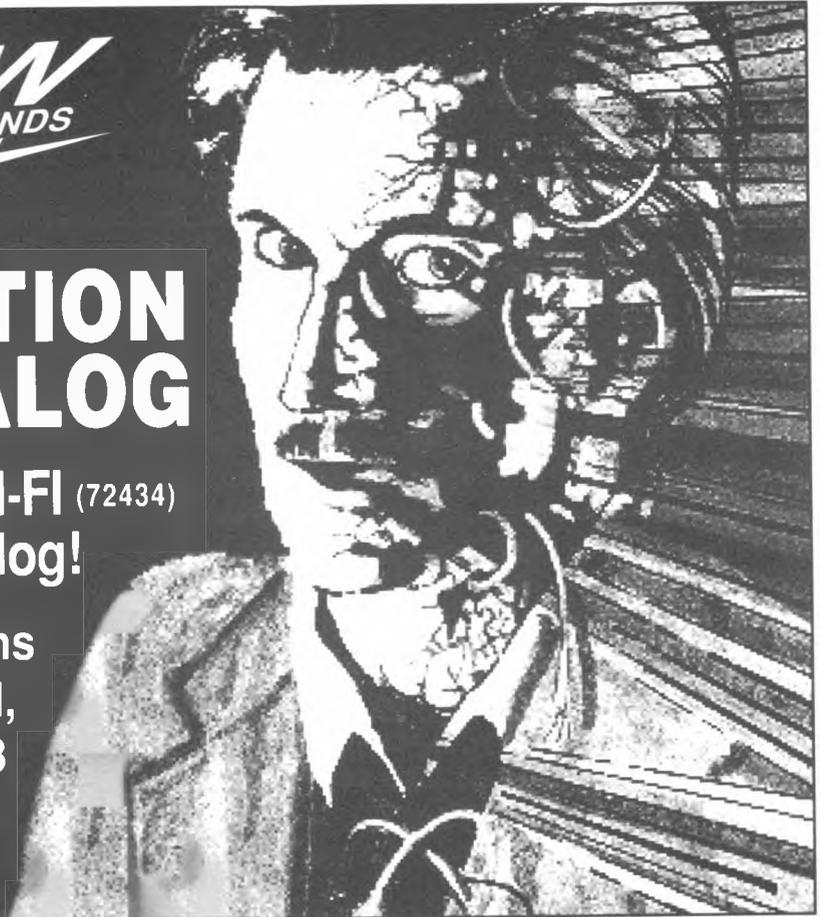
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METHANE

by Michael Brockington
illustrated by Fredrik King

A filing card is taped to the lobby window:

No pets
No children
No waterbeds
No Vacancies

The words are typewritten. The ends of the scotch tape holding the card in place have peeled back, leaving a faint outline on the glass, but every other detail at 2732 is pristine.

Behind the glass a polished black floor leading to a pair of sentry elevators. Between them a standing ashtray, surface groomed like a fresh-raked sandtrap. Brass mail-slots to the left, row on row, waiting to be fed. In one corner lurks a potted plant, its leaves gleaming plastic, shiny as a new scar.

Only three feet of grass divide the building from the city, but such grass! Each blade is the same length, trimmed with nail clippers perhaps, and the whole of it an impossible paint-by-numbers grass-green. Crayola number five. A "Keep off the grass" sign would be redundant. This is not grass to be walked on, chewed on, trifled with.

2732 is rent-controlled, climate-controlled, birth-controlled, no pets or children, please! Its facade has all the surreal cleanliness of a kitchen in a television ad.

'Round the back, air conditioners drip into overflowing Smithrites where all the rubble from 2732 collects and decays in the deep cool of the alleyway. A sanitation strike is in its second week now, the garbage twisting into ghettos for rats. The surrounding buildings are tall, though not quite so tall as 2732. High tension wires and telephone cables are strung overhead on trestles, filtering out the sun even in its one overhead hour, so only strips of thin sunlight touch the ground.

At seven each morning Drome, the superintendent, emerges with over-ripe bags of yesterday's trash, cheap plastic already splitting. No one else from 2732 ever comes here.

On the ninth floor Sarah Delvecchio swirls a teaspoon of cream into her in-

stant. looking out over the city from her kitchen window. Two feet by two, no larger than the TV screen in the other room, and it couldn't be opened either, but what a view, she thinks -- and then, with a shake of her head, she marks another 'X' on the calendar. Sarah counts the marks filling the squares of June: twenty-seven. Twenty-seven times this month she's caught herself thinking about the view.

Sometimes she thinks about taking a lawn chair up to the roof, just to sit that one floor higher and sip her coffee, twenty feet higher above the streets and people. She thinks it might be quiet there, that far above the city; no sound but wind singing through the aerials, a cornfield silence. But the door to the roof has a sign in official red letters, "No Access," and the door is always locked. No doubt the roof is reserved for important people, for snipers and suicides. It is not available to tourists. Sarah hasn't decided yet what symbol she will use on the calendar for thoughts of the roof.

But even from her kitchen window she can see skyscrapers in every direction, stretching breathless into the sky, and the setting sun dazzles her, reflected from acres of mirrored window-panes. With a pair of binoculars, she thinks. I might see myself reflected in a office tower uptown -- a tiny woman in a tiny window, with tubes for eyes. Suddenly anxious, Sarah turns toward the bedroom: the baby has been quiet too long.

In her nightgown, Hettie Riordan shuffles through her suite, searching for her cane. "Forty-eight dollars," she grumbles, "and not even covered by medical. Forty-eight dollars, and I get around just fine without it." But she likes to have it with her, beside her while she reads, and it helps, getting up from her chair, from her bed. "Forty-eight dollars," she mutters, it's like a pet, really, a lazy old tom-cat, a comfortable presence nearby. Walking to the market, she might need it, but Hettie hasn't gone out in eight years, not since her sister's funeral. Eight years and forty-eight dollars, and now she can't even remember which

floor she lives on. A home-help girl comes in once a week to shop and clean.

Over every window the blinds are drawn, day and night, and each room is carpeted in a dark pile, even the kitchen. A small and private world, decorated in twilight and silence. This is enough for me, Hettie thinks, fixing supper or having a sip of tea, this is more than I need. She has no income, pays no taxes.

Her slippers shush over the carpet, into the bedroom, through to the sitting room, and there in a shadowed corner leans the cane. Nonchalant. With a sigh she seizes it, and gratefully lowers herself into her chair.

"Where did you get to?" she chides, and thumps it twice on the carpet. I'll wait for the girl to arrive, though no time passes in these blinded rooms, and the skin on my hands has gone whiter than wax. When did that happen, she wonders, and forty-eight dollars.

Frank O'Malley is pretending to read the paper, while his wife watches TV. That is, the TV is on, tuned to channel 98, but there's no picture. The screen dances with static. Frank rustles his pages conspicuously.

"No, I won't turn it off," his wife replies. "It's no bother to you, anyway." She settles back in her chair. "Deaf as two posts," she says. At least Frank thinks that's what she said.

He rustles through the business section. "Did you say something, my dear?" he asks, and smiles behind his paper. She can't hear a smile, now, can she?

Problem with the TV is the remote control has gone missing. Frank suspects his wife has hidden it, or maybe thrown it out. Run it through the garburator, maybe. And the television, modern wonder that it is, has no way of changing the channel manually.

"What's the point of paying for a hundred channels?" Frank asks his paper.

"Mute yourself," says his wife. "It's nearly eight."

Frank tries to concentrate on the market reports but the words are smudged and elusive. Blots of type rearrange themselves on the page whenever he

glances away. Only the headlines hold still.

"Hello?" says the television. Crackle and pause: "Are you there?"

"Here we go," says his wife. "You should turn up your hearing aid, Frank, really. It's better than the soaps."

Should wash your ears out with soap, thinks Frank. "You could catch a disease, listening to that trash." His wife has recently discovered that channel 98 picks up their neighbor's cellular phone. Frank sighs, turns to Sports, hoping it won't be a rerun of last night's conversation.

And in the basement Drome lies on the bed in his one room that comes free with the job, watching the ice melt in the glass of gin balanced on his stomach. That's the fine thing about the basement, it's cooler than anywhere else, with no windows, and thick concrete supporting walls for insulation. Your ice melts just a little bit slower down here than it does for the gentry upstairs. Mind you, it gets a little damp besides. There are water-stains on the concrete floor, and a pervasive, claustrophobic odor of damp paper.

On the whole, Drome is more sympathetic to water in its frozen state. Easy to make, easy to measure. You can count up the ice-cubes in your freezer and know exactly where you stand. Drop a few on the floor, and you just sweep them up -- try doing that with a glass of water. No indeed, there's water and there's ice, and I know which side I'm on. Watching the ice grown smaller in his glass.

Beyond the blanket tacked up across his door stretches the shadowed basement, cluttered with thread-bare furniture and broken appliances. Pipes and heating ducts coil high in the dark under the ceiling. Below those, ranks of fluorescent tubes, some healthy, some reduced to a bare glow, or flickering like candles about to go out. Here and there boxes are stacked under plastic shrouds: personal effects seized from delinquent tenants. The scrounge is poor quality, but Drome has at least managed to fill his bookshelf. Somewhere he read that

writing is 1 part inspiration to 99 of perspiration, which accounts, he supposes, for the smell of damp paper.

At the south end of the basement is the terminus of the garbage chutes where, come 6 a.m., Drome will have to go about the unpleasant business of transferring the night's waste into bags, to be carried out into the morning dark.

Maria isn't from 2732. She comes by now and again to rummage in back for odds and ends. Forty-two, and she looks sixty; since Morris died she's been living on the street. How long since hospital, funeral, nembatal, isolation, institutionalization, community re-integration? Lifetimes, lifetimes. Time moves differently down here. That's why the people she sees in the street walk so rapidly, to minimize their exposure. Quick, from taxi to door, from one air-conditioned space to another, immune to the seasons, inoculated against passing time. Sometimes they wear surgical masks when they go outside, to eliminate temporal contaminants from the bloodstream. Sunglasses, identical black lenses set in every face, hands oily with sunblock SPF 99. They are tourists in their own city.

Maria has traveler blood, her mother a gypsy out of Spain. She worked the tourists for a while, when she first hit the street, but they had no stomach for the fortunes she told. And so for a while she played the professional gypsy, with bandanna and bangles, and a litany of long life and happiness, long life and happiness, long life double happiness, until she could hardly tell she was lying. There was money to be made, and it was such a slow form of suicide, Maria didn't even notice, until the day she cast her own fortune, and found she had only a month left to live before she became a gorgio herself. So there it was. Maria sold the fake jewelry for a couple of dollars, and that was the end of the money.

Knee-deep in wadded paper towels, orange rinds, coffee grounds, dusk infiltrating the alley. The garbage strike is an intercession. "Maybe a bonanza this week, Morris," says Maria to her dead

husband. "something to eat, maybe even something to wear." Morris is silent.

It's a good spot behind 2732, halfway cool, so food doesn't spoil too fast. Maria's been coming by for a few months now. Down at the low end of the fire escapes, sifting through the rags and tatters, she fingers the frayed ends of their lives, all those people in their cool apartments, catalogs rejected paraphernalia and possibilities. Maria is at home among the other detritus not wanted inside 2732.

Some of the things she's found? Old toys, boneless rag dolls leaking stuffing from split seams. A bag full of eggshells and pornographic magazines that Maria cleaned and sold to a bookseller downtown. Cheap electric alarm clocks. Some of them worked, when she tried them at the shelter. Time is disposable in 2732. Maria knows. Junk mail: "You may already be... Dear Friend... Important Documents Enclosed... Limited time offer!" A tide of ersatz fortunes that remind her what she almost became.

Other things: love letters grown stale and thrown away, no one caring enough to burn them. Outgrown clothes, first-draft manuscripts, dwarf Christmas trees the colour of rust. Dated birthday cards, dead roses.

And these objects are not empty of life, even come to these odd ends. They have sweatstains and bloodstains, attachments, fingerprints. Maria can feel their emotional echoes, ripening in the rich compost of the garbage -- frustrations wrapped in last month's newspapers, tinder-dry irritations, muted desires emptied with the ashtrays. These things are volatile as methane, and Maria knows they will not be easily cleaned away when the sanitation strike ends.

"Look, I just don't talk that way, specially on the phone."

"What do you mean, on the phone? You never say it."

Pie plate, pie, fork, napkin.

"You're stunted, Simon. You're verbally arrested, you know that? I mean, I can say it anytime. I love you. Easy, right?"

"Wendy..."

Fridge closed, kitchen light off.

"I. Love. You. I love you! Iloveyou, Iloveyou --"

"Stop *saving* that! Jesus, you're sick."

Static laughter from the TV. Frank puts the plate on the table and eases back into his recliner.

"You know what I can hardly believe, Simon? The way you wince when I say it to your face."

"Come on..."

"You *wince*. Like I just hit you."

Frank's recliner is separated from his wife's by the table. They both face the TV screen, side by side, like airplane seats.

"I think you're addicted to that ear-wash," he says.

"Just being neighborly," his wife says.

"You think I've never told a woman I love her?"

"Not counting your mother."

"I used to do it all the time, Wendy. I just never meant it. I don't want to lie to you that way! I mean, I thought we had something special going here."

Frank sees her going for the pie from the corner of his eyes. He feints at her hand with the fork, grabbing the plate from the table with his other hand.

Tony Delvecchio is just coming up the walk to 2732. The temptation to step on the grass is strong tonight. His shift ends at eight, another hour to drive home, and there's almost never another soul to be seen when he comes up the walk, with the sky gone blue, and lights glowing behind the curtained windows of 2732. If he paused on his way up the walk, slipped off his shoes and socks to detour barefoot over the grass, who would know? The gentle touch of the grass, cool on the soles of his feet -- who would know? -- cool as a mermaid's kiss.

"People could get a wrong idea," said his wife, when he tried to explain it to her one time, this feeling, coming up the walk. "What if they thought you were looking in their windows? Don't attract attention, Tony. Anyway, it's not proper, being out in public with naked feet."

"Shush now, Daniel," she says now, Sarah Delvecchio, up on the ninth floor, cradling the baby, rocking the baby. "You be quiet, and Mommy'll sing you a song, okay?" The radio is on in the kitchen, not too loud. They leave it on all the time, even when they go to bed. Sometimes it calms the baby, and the rest of the time it masks his crying. Sarah starts to sing along with the radio, in a quiet little-girl voice, though someone might hear him, still.

There's a late supper heating on the stove. Sarah sings, and Daniel laughs, and the potatoes are just boiling over, and Tony is rising in the elevator like a champagne bubble, like an embolism, thinking that tomorrow night, perhaps, he'll walk on the damn lawn, by damn, and the floor indicator bings as the elevator passes 8, where Hettie Riordan is watching the cable news on the text channel, with the ferry sailings scrolling across the bottom of the screen, when she notices the cable news clock says it's 9:30 at night. Almost time for bed, she thinks, forgetting that she has been waiting for the home-help girl who won't be coming because it's the wrong time on the wrong day. Muzak oozes from the television, sound turned low, and Hettie uses her cane to lever herself up out of her chair so she can go make a last cup of tea.

Maria finds a bag of dinner buns, spotted with mold. Not bad. And a package of cream cheese, past its best-before date. "Same as me, Morris," says Maria.

Morris is silent, but perhaps he smiles? It's growing hard to see, now.

Street time. Maria has never found anything down here whose date had not expired. Over the hill. She can remember how it was when Morris was still alive, going to the Super-Value. It was always the same, an eternal, platonic shopping experience. The same temperature, the same music on the PA, the same fruits and vegetables all the year round. Strawberries in December, and sprays of water over the produce to mark the quarter hour. It was like watching the same movie every night on the late show. In-

terchangeable hours. Lifetimes. It feels far away, a distant time-zone.

Someone has been cleaning out their medicine closet. Maria finds a cache of empty bottles with typescript labels: tylenol, fiorinal, seconal, pentathol. It's too dark to read, but Maria can feel the impressions of the typewriter. The names surface like a catechism. She shakes each bottle, but they are silent, empty. Valium, lithium, amphetamine, anti-histamine.

She digs deeper, for that one vial she might have missed, for the one that might still be there, unemptied. Cold cream, vaseline, milk cartons, magazines. And then cold plastic, a snap-seal freezer bag. Maria lifts it out, but it's dark. The seal is broken, and it's dark, and there's a smell from the bag like raw liver, but it's dark, so Maria lifts it up to the last light filtering in from the alley's mouth. Blood on plastic, and a shape about the size of a sparrow, and it's dark, yes, but Maria can see small hands, tiny fingers. She closes her eyes and holds the bag in her hands, in her lap, and is silent a while, in the dark.

Her eyes open suddenly.

Distressed by memory: "Our baby, Morris, what happened to our daughter?"

We had no children, says Morris.

"But a child. I remember a child, sometime, a long time, lifetimes ago." She looks around, but it's too dark to see if there's anyone else in the alley.

That was you, Maria, says Morris, sadly.

Dexedrine, caffeine, codeine, adrenaline.

Drome is out of ice. He looks in the freezer. Empty. I forgot to count. Plenty vodka, no ice. We carry on in the face of adversity, he thinks, pouring the vodka.

It's time to check the trapline. Drome ducks past the blanket into the basement proper. The first trap is empty, the second is empty, the third empty as an ice-cube tray. The rats are getting smarter. Drome can appreciate that.

The fourth trap: empty as a vodka glass. Drome practices his Quick Smile of Recognition on the fifth, empty, trap.

The smile is too fast, quicker than the flicker of the dying fluorescents. Give it another shot. Hi, how ya doin'? he smiles at a dented refrigerator.

The gentry may expect a Quick Smile of Recognition, should he pass them in the hall. Practice is essential. The smile must be the correct length. Not an Impatient Mock-Smile, not a Lingering Smile of Familiarity. Policy recommends one to one and a quarter seconds.

Drome isn't a people person; he can admit that. It's no crime surely, not these days. It's almost a requirement for living in the city. Someone once told him that people are 98% water. Makes you wonder, whether you might not just evaporate, one hot summer. Drome's ex-wife did something of the kind. Buildings, now, buildings are a comfortable proposition. A building isn't going to run out on you. You know where the pipes go, you find where the wires run behind the walls, and they're going to be in the same place the next time you go looking. Blueprints, electrical diagrams -- you can understand a building. You can reach an understanding. Nosir, there's people and there's buildings, and buildings are a sight more reliable. Though commonly cluttered with people, it's true.

The next trap is empty. The rats are evolving at a rapid clip, with the help of steel traps and natural selection. A few more weeks and they'll be ready to move uptown to a ritzier building, or maybe take that promotion and head for the suburbs.

We need a pure architecture, a true art. Take people out of the equation and design a building for its own sake, then you might have something. No compromise. I could be a curator instead of a superintendent.

"You know what I hate?" Sarah asks.

"Can you let me finish eating?" Tony says.

"I hate not being able to make friends in the building. I hate never inviting anyone into the apartment. They think we're snobs. Tony!"

"They see the kid, Drome finds out, then what, Sarah? What then? I'm

working two jobs, we can barely afford the rent here." He looks at her. She's staring out the window, smoking, flicking ashes into the sink. "Where would we go? Live with your sister again?"

"I hate," she says, "not being able to go out without smuggling Daniel down the stairs in a picnic basket."

"You want to argue? Turn up the radio. You want the neighbors to hear us arguing over the kid?"

Sarah's hands are never still when she's angry, her body language a rare martial art. Glowing ashes fly from the end of her cigarette at unpredictable moments and velocities. It encourages the medium-range argument, at which she is most skilled. The linoleum countertop around the sink is pocked with heat bubbles, cigarette scars.

Sarah turns off the radio. "I hate this damn song. Twenty times today, I've heard it."

Tony pushes his chair back, stands up. "Turn it on."

She takes up a defiant position in front of the radio, laying down a perimeter of smoke and embers. "You're paranoid, Tony. I'm living with a paranoid person."

"I was talking to Mrs. Andersen down the hall, you know what she told me? Her son is on the waiting list to get into this building. Think about that. She wouldn't like to see his name move up the list a notch?"

He goes into the bedroom and turns on the clock radio. Its reception is poor, the music coming out distorted: easy listening made difficult. In the other room, Sarah screams.

"I can't even think anymore!" Sarah fumes through the doorway like an elegant demon, spitting smoke with every word. "I'm going out of my mind, and you know what? The voices in my head are all disc jockeys and weathermen. I can't go on living with a soundtrack, Tony." She tosses the cigarette butt back into the kitchen and takes a fresh one from the pack. Tony seizes the moment, and rushes in for the clinch, pinning her arms in an enveloping hug before she

can light the match. Sarah struggles a moment, then gives in, crying.

"I hate living here." Tony gives her a comforting squeeze. It's not safe to release her, yet. "I don't want to hate you too," she whispers. "I don't want to hate Daniel."

"Don't be crazy," Tony says. He smooths the hair out of Sarah's face and kisses her gently on each closed eyelid. "Things'll seem different in the morning."

Maria understands. There is a torn child in a bag, in her hands, a hemi-semi-demi-child, smaller than the hands that hold it. The ageless apartment dwellers know the price, and have struck the bargain.

The sun is a poison; Maria understands that. Gravity is a drug, whose influence can be weakened by living ten stories, twenty stories above the earth. The air, the water, the blood of another human, the unprotected touch: these things are deadly. And so the turistas avoid them. Maria understands this, to prolong their lives. But if there is to be truly no end to life, there can be no beginning. It's as simple as $e=mc^2$. And this last bargain they have made, this Maria has not understood until now. The turistas have cut a deal with the pied piper. He has led their children away under the mountain -- and that is exactly what they wished.

Maria sets the demi-child down, gentle in the dark. A metal barrel leans against the wall of 2732, blistered orange with rust and partway filled with newspapers, cardboard, butcher paper, Sunday comics. Maria takes a box of wooden matches from her pocket. Scratch and crackle, and a match blooms like a prayer in the alley night. She drops it into the barrel where it slips out of sight, tumbling into the barrel's origami heart. A second match, then a third, leaving retinal afterimages that together start to form a pattern. Maria stops after twelve. The paper is burning well by this time. The ashcan creaks and groans, stretching with the heat. She tosses the remaining handful of matches into the can, like

spice into a stew, and the air is scorched with sulphur.

Funeral, burial, phenobarbital. She doesn't need to remember all that. Burial traps the spirit in the earth. Cremation sets it free. The child in the bag is so tiny Maria almost thinks it might rise on the fire's updraft, but no, it falls easily into the flames. The freezer bag softens, melting around the body, then the plastic ignites. The body is hidden in light, Herky-jerky shadows stutter across the alley walls.

Blood of an unbaptized child, says Maria thoughtfully. It stirs memories of protocols, recipes, learned from her grandmother lifetimes ago. The barrel overflows with flame, leaks light from holes rusted through its body.

Would the children be changed, if I called them back from under the hill, wonders Maria. Would they have grown old and strange in the deep earth? The sun is elusive enough down here at street level, rising late over the tops of the buildings, setting early. How does time run, under the mountain, where there are no days or seasons, and gravity's embrace is heavy as heartbreak?

Maria turns to the garbage heap for ingredients. She finds a thinning hair-piece right near the top, and one of Drome's dead rats, one of the stupid ones. Rat skull. Into the fire. Hair of virgin; rat for whiskers and plague.

Maria feels herself growing older and heavy with memory. She can almost picture her grandmother's face, now. It floats behind a veil of cliché and medication, like a fish beneath ice. White hair, yes, but surprisingly dark eyebrows, and black eyes. Eyes that can look in two directions at once, like a bird's. The face is younger than Maria's own.

"Your problem," says the TV, "is you can't communicate. I mean, okay, you have the technological capability, but you got nothing to say..."

"You know your problem, Frank?" says his wife. "You don't take an interest in reality. You'd rather read the paper than go outside and look around at what's happening."

Here we go with My Problem. It's all so tidy, the way she can boil everything down to one problem.

"I just want to read my paper," says Frank.

"You phone me up," says the TV, "and the conversation always degenerates into longer and longer pauses. There's no such thing as a comfortable silence, on the phone. You don't know how golden silence really is, until you're paying a buck a minute long distance."

"Your problem is you'd rather watch some sit-com from 1952 than listen to what's going on right next door."

Frank turns a page, silent.

"It's torture," says the TV. "You're going to force it out of me by sitting there, not saying anything, until I have to say something, anything, just like I am right now. You're a fucking vacuum, sucking words out of me. You run out of things to chat about, and then you have to tell the truth, is that the idea?"

"You won't even talk to me," says his wife. "Just sit there with your damn paper. And you wonder why I want the TV on all the time."

"I thought that was why we bought the television," says Frank. "So we wouldn't have to talk to each other."

"Your problem," says his wife, Eileen, "is you can't communicate," says the TV.

"You want to *communicate* with me," says Frank slowly, "then write a damn letter to the editor."

Into the fire. Eye of newt, says Maria, even though it's really just a dead tropical fish from someone's aquarium. No different from substituting oil for butter in a shortcake. The fire mutters in the barrel, and smoke gathers above it, thickening, clotting.

"Tears of the dead?" says Maria to Morris. A person is 98% water; their tears are of little value or power. A ghost is 99% memory, and every teardrop subtracts from that final percent.

"Do you remember us in the Starlight Lounge," says Maria, "dancing until the night wrapped around into morning?"

I remember, says Morris. He is 99% memory, after all. And do you remember

the night we met, out by the ocean? City lights behind us, and lights of the ships anchored in the bay, and rainbow reflections off the oil in the water?

"No," says Maria. "No, I don't. I'm sorry." She runs a hand through her hair. "Electroshock," she says. "At least my hair grew back."

Something, a tear perhaps, or perhaps just a scatter of drops blown from one of the air-conditioners overhead, hisses against the hot metal of the ashcan.

My tea is cold. Odd. Hettie thinks. Did I fall asleep? She dips a finger in her teacup. Cold as day-old dishwater. Am I asleep right now? If that's the case, I really ought to go to bed. She has dreams sometimes, she is sure of it, but the dreams are hardly different from when she is awake -- dreams of eating crackers and corned beef in the kitchen, of reading an Eliot novel in the living room. But her eyes are no good for reading anymore and she never like corned beef, except as a little girl. She watches for clues that she has fallen asleep; the game grows subtler, day by day.

The clock says 11:00 but is that AM or PM? She could draw the drapes to look outside, but what good will that do, if I'm sleeping? Everything is where it should be. Kettle quiet on the stove, dirty dishes in the rack, waiting for her teacup to join them, biscuit tin on top of the refrigerator. But something is missing. Some article is out of place. If I were dead, Hettie wonders, would I know it? Would there be any shred of evidence at all?

You should go to bed. She takes off her glasses, places them on the table where she is sure to find them in the morning. And if they aren't there in the morning? Does that mean I'm dreaming now, or will it be because I'm dreaming then? One hand on the table, one on the back of the hard kitchen chair, and she forces herself up, off-balance, but not falling, not tonight. Not today.

My cane, she realizes at last, I thought I had my cane. Worse than an old tomcat, the way it wanders off when you want it.

We sat on a log half-buried in the sand. There were fires off in the distance along the beach. We traced out constellations made by the lights of the ships in the harbour -- you found the Great Bear, I got Orion, we saw half a dozen big, little and medium dippers.

"No, no, I don't remember that," Maria says. "I'm too tired, Morris." She wraps her coat tighter around herself. "Do I look much older than I did this morning?" she asks.

It's dark.

"I feel so old," Maria replies.

But Morris is right, it is growing dark again, the fire more smoke than flame, now, smoke twisting and curling up the fire-escapes. Black scraps of burnt paper rise and drift away down the alley. High above the ashcan's fading light, the smoke frays, unravels, and 2732 breathes it in through the intake vents of a hundred air-conditioners.

"Sit with me, Morris," says Maria. "Come sit beside me while I sleep a bit." A breeze stirring the muggy air, flaming shreds of Sunday comics falling gently to the ground, with arches of cheerful colour still visible. Nibbled by the fire, only partially consumed. The Family Circus. Dennis the Menace. The Wizard of Id.

Frank O'Malley has turned off his hearing aid. He watches his wife yell at him with a certain amusement. Her mouth opens and closes like that of a fish in the bottom of a boat. Frank can almost match her mouth to dialogue to in his head. He's certainly heard it often enough.

What would it feel like. Frank wonders, to just pick up that fork from that plate right there and just stab it into her neck? What would that be like? Mouth opening, closing.

Some initial resistance, he thinks, like a balloon that refuses to pop, getting underfoot the day after the birthday party. Yes, certainly, a struggle at first, but after that initial resistance it would slide in easily enough. Oil on glass, blood on metal, coming to a rest with a satisfying thunk, tines completely buried in her flesh. Open. close.

And how would she look? Mouth wide, silent scream, but with his hearing aid off she would be locked outside his head, TV with the sound down, and nothing in my ears but the rush of my own heart.

One fork might not do the job. It might take several, even a whole dinner set, all things considered. Stainless steel handles sprouting from her neck in every direction. Not the silver. Frank thinks, the silver we save for company. Open, close.

Maria's eyes are closed. She runs through the names in her mind, the litany of pharmaceuticals, but they are without power, empty as the bottles found hours, nights, weeks ago. End and beginning are approaching with the same terrible speed. A memory surfaces of herself, six years old, looking into a mirror and making horrible faces of concentration as she tries to make her eyes roll in opposite directions. Reverse cross-eyed, a sharp solemn face, and short black hair. That couldn't be me, Maria thinks, and feels her bones growing brittle inside her.

Shush and rustle, over the carpets. "Come on out now, old forty-eight, old Tom. You know there's only four rooms to hide in." Bedroom, bathroom, living room. Distant music from the TV. Everything is soft and blurred without my glasses, only colours and outlines, like I'm seeing everything through wax paper. Hush rooms, faraway music. I'll have to go back to the kitchen for my specs, or I'll never find a thing.

The kitchen is a collage of white forms and shadows, empty of colour. Hettie feels around on the table for her glasses, and finds nothing but a dirty teacup. Could I be dreaming already, she wonders. I can hear the refrigerator humming and the tap dripping. I know this is my kitchen. There are clues. And surely the whole experience is not really ordinary enough to be one of her dreams.

Hettie shuffles back into the living room, legs growing weary now, in search of her glasses. The TV bumps into her hip, solid enough for something that looks so insubstantial. Hettie stumbles

toward the blue blob of the armchair, almost tripping into the coffee table, but she doesn't fall, not yet.

"For goodness sake, Hettie," says her sister. "Stop wandering around before you hurt yourself." Surprised, Hettie squints past the chair, and it's hard to see, but yes, she thinks, yes that must be Dottie standing there, a stooped smear, all outline and colour. She's wearing the same shapeless grey dress she's had on since 1962, with a corona of white hair fraying out from her head, gone yellow at the ends from decades of cigarette smoke.

"Sit down and rest yourself." Dottie says in her familiar hoarse voice, "while I go hunt out that old cane of yours."

Hettie almost falls into the armchair, and gives a grateful sign. "I wouldn't mind sitting just a minute," she says. "Although I'm sure I could find it myself, you know."

"Of course you could."

Hettie can't be sure, but she thinks her sister is smiling. "See if you can't find my glasses, too," she says. "so I can have a good look at you. It's been such a long time, hasn't it?"

"You always were misplacing things," Dottie says, moving toward the kitchen. "I used to think it was deliberate."

There's a smell in the living room, faint but unpleasant, something like a singed oven mitt. It must be the cigarettes, Hettie chuckles. "Do you remember that time?" she calls into the kitchen. If Dottie replies, it is too quiet to hear. "You were lighting a cigarette off the old gas stove, and your hair caught on fire? Whoosh!" Hettie laughs again. "Had to wear a hat for three months so Mother wouldn't find out? Most peculiar, people said."

Two packs a day, that was Dottie, fingers dark with nicotine. The doctors said it was the smoking that did her in. Said her lungs were black as a coal miner's, at the end. And here she is, eight years after her funeral, she still hasn't kicked the habit.

And this is the moment Hettie realizes that now, now indeed she must be dreaming.

*

Maria dreams she is dancing, high and happy in the Starlight Lounge. The lights are low. She and Morris move like swimmers through air made fluid with smoke and music. The lounge rotates atop the old Regency Hotel; sometimes they pass near a window, and through the haze she can see the stars spinning past. Sparkle and glimmer, brass and cool white piano keys as they whirl past the band. Lazy smoke curls from the bell of a saxophone. Morris smiles down at her, teeth gleaming in the dimness, and she can almost make out his face. His hands are cool in hers.

"Is this really how it was?" Maria asks.

"Exactly the same," Morris says.

They pause by the rusty ashcan in the centre of the lounge. There is no sign of fire now. Maria spits into the can. No telltale hiss of hidden coals. Laughter, distant in the smoke, of other dancers, hidden couples. Confident, Maria sinks both hands into the soft ash, feeling it slide up between her fingers, over her wrists, like pulling on a pair of gloves against the winter. The lingering heat seeps through her skin, soothing the old bones. She closes both hands and draws them overflowing from the barrel. Then, holding her hands high, Maria spins, letting the ashes spill away on gusts of music. She spins counter-clockwise, counter the rotation of the Starlight Lounge. Spinning, and the music slows, stops, reverses, spinning the world back away from the dawn.

The building is not well. There are grumbles and rattles in the air ducts. The fluorescents are reduced to a neurotic flicker. Even here in the basement the air is fever warm. It isn't just the vodka. Drome is sure. 2732 is restless.

Drome prowls through the basement, checking his line. Too hot to sleep; too tired to think. The bait is gone from some of the traps, taken without tripping the release. Showing off, he thinks.

The mechanism of evolution is death. This much is clear. As the organism evolves, the art of dying must be refined into subtler forms. These rats are getting

so damn smart. Drome figures, he could sell them to the university for experiments. If he could catch them. Let the biologists evolve the bastards, with induced cancers or a rodent retrovirus. I've done all I can. If you can't tempt them with cheese, offer them scholarships.

But the next trap on the circuit has actually caught something. Must be one of the last of the old generation. Drome pries back the spring-loaded arm, and lifts the dead rat by its tail. Poor fat bugger hasn't a speck of life left in it. The hammer moves so fast you never even see it coming down.

Drome heads for the garbage bins, rat suspended from thumb and forefinger. He has to place his feet carefully; the traps are concentrated most heavily around the garbage area. And it's not that he takes any pleasure in killing. The rats do me no harm. But the building and I, we have an understanding. The rats' nests become fire hazards; they gnaw the insulation from wiring in the walls. Drome is necessary to preserve the integrity of the structure, an antibody, an immune system.

2732 is unwell. Drome senses its agitation. Approaching the garbage terminus, watching his feet, he hears an odd sound, distant but growing closer. An unhealthy racket from overhead, coming nearer, a horrid bang and tumble. The metal chutes rattle, echo like gongs. A rivet spins down from above and chatters away over the cement, setting off a clatter of mousetraps. Drome teeters, off-balance, traps gleaming to every side, waiting for him to fall. And down with a clatter and thump, down like Santa Claus on a bad night, down, down the chute comes Missus O'Malley.

The garbage vat shudders at the impact. Echoes die away slowly, fading into the gentle roar of the air conditioning.

Everything could be normal, thinks Drome: don't look, don't speculate. Go back to your room and finish the vodka, and in the morning you won't remember a thing. But already he is rising on tiptoe to peer over the edge of the vat. The damn body is crumpled into one corner. Bloodstained dress, and enough holes in

her neck to make him wonder if there isn't a whole congregation of vampires loose up above. This isn't right. Drome thinks. Not in my building. "Not in my building, you fuckers!" he screams up the chutes. Hollow iron reverberations, then silence.

Someone up there is abusing the facilities. Dumping 150 pound bodies down the chutes with no thought for the damage they might cause. Not right. Drome heads for the elevators, rat still in hand.

The baby is crying for milk. Sarah isn't even aware of waking up and she's already half out of bed. She gives Tony a sharp poke in the back, but he just grumbles in his sleep, shifts away. He never takes his turn, hardly ever. "Gotta get my sleep." Sarah says to herself in her best poppa bear voice. "gotta get to work in the morning." Sometimes Tony sneaks earplugs home from work. Whenever Sarah finds a pair she throws them out.

She feels around for her cigarettes on the night-stand. Only one left in the package, not good. She can't sleep more than three hours at a stretch any more, without the baby crying, or a nicotine craving waking her up. The nights ease by so slow. And yes, things might seem better in the morning, but morning is a distant thing.

Music is playing a sad country lament, and Daniel is crying as though he can already understand the words, but he quiets as soon as he sees the glow of the cigarette floating toward him through the dark.

And the odd thing, thinks Frank O'Malley, stacking the last fork in the dishwasher, the odd thing is, he can still hear his wife's voice. His ex-wife's voice. Even with his hearing-aid sitting on top of the microwave, her voice penetrates like a dentist's drill, whining through tooth and bone to vibrate inside his head.

Your problem, she says, with a nasty sarcastic edge, is you don't know how to express your feelings.

It's a dilemma. Everything else is muffled and distant, but her voice is present and persistent as the whine of a mosquito in your bedroom at night.

Do you know, if you'd gone blind instead of deaf we'd probably still have a happy marriage?

"You're violating your contract. Eileen," Frank says. "'Til death do us part, that's what it says."

Get yourself a lawyer, Frank, his wife says. I got things to say, and for once you're going to listen.

The TV is still on in the other room. Frank turns up the volume as high as it will go, high enough, he hopes, to drown Eileen's voice. Even without his hearing aid.

"I love you," roars the television. Then, "What the fuck is that?"

I knew you'd learn to enjoy listening to this, says his wife.

"I can hear my voice," says the TV. "Coming out of the goddamn wall!"

Maria dances on. She turns, turns again, her hair swirling out, lazy in air heavy with cigarette smoke. She and Morris glide through the dim room, briefly sweeping clear corridors through the smoke, which slowly close behind them. They are the centre around which the Starlight Lounge spins itself. Other couples occasionally draw near, then are whirled away by centrifugal force.

Maria tries to speak, but gives up, afraid of anything that might spoil this perfect moment. Afraid a wasp might fly out of her mouth and sting her awake. Hidden somewhere in the haze, the band swings into another Gershwin number, not giving anyone a chance to sit down, but it's all right, it's all right, they could dance all night and never feel tired.

Tony Delvecchio wakes up to a taste of ashes. Sarah's mouth over his. She doesn't break the kiss as they make love, silent, urgent. No words, only breath and body language. She comes almost immediately, a stifled scream trapped between their sealed lips. He is just coming fully awake as she rolls off him and falls

asleep -- click! -- like a telephone hanging up.

Tony stares up into the darkness for long minutes, pulse rapid as a busy signal, gradually slowing. "Shit," he says at last, and more loudly, "shit!" but Sarah doesn't wake up, doesn't even twitch.

Finally he gets up, pads through the dark to the kitchen. Maybe a bite will help him get back to sleep. No noise from Daniel, as he passes the dark blob of the crib in the corner. At least they didn't wake the kid.

The linoleum is cool underfoot. Tony thinks of the grass downstairs, chill with moonlight. "You know what I see down there?" Sarah had said to him, when he tried to explain one time, this feeling about the grass in front of 2732. "Every time I go down? Dead starlings, three, four of them, every time. They use some kind of pesticide, kills the birds when they eat the bugs. I don't want you coming up here with poison feet, Tony." She didn't understand, not really.

Something skitters away as he kicks it, in the dark. Tony switches on the light. The kitchen is a disaster. There must be four or five empty milk cartons scattered around, pictures of missing kids and drops of milk all over the floor. The refrigerator door is hanging open, the motor humming overtime. A burnt smell so heavy in the air, Tony is surprised the smoke alarm hasn't gone off. Probably the motor in the fridge, burning itself out.

The radio is still on, humming to itself, with an occasional cough of static, "Potato, potahto...Tomato, tomahto..." Enough to make you hungry.

Tony crosses the kitchen to close the door of the fridge, and sees one carton of milk has been left inside. The picture on the side is Sarah. "Have you seen me?" reads the caption. Tony recognizes the photograph; it's from the living room, a photo from before their wedding. She's torn out her face and scotch-taped it to the carton.

Sarah looks so different in the picture, laughing, with her hair cut short. How many years ago was that, a camera had somehow caught a glimpse of that wild,

unfamiliar happiness? 1/250th of a second, how long ago? Her hair is long now, almost to her waist. How did it happen. Tony wonders. How did we get from there to here? Looking around the wreckage in the kitchen.

That's when he notices the sink is full of milk. Full almost to overflowing, milk the same level as the white countertop, held back from the surrounding formica only by a thin rim of stainless steel marking the edge of the sink. It takes a moment to sink in. What a waste, what a criminal waste.

Tony moves to the sink. The milk is opaque, unrippled, smoother than the cigarette-scarred counter. Have you seen me? asks a carton by the breadbox. The harsh, uncurtained window above the sink lets in the night. Tony can see his reflection there, pools of shadow from the overhead light where his eyes should be. He wants to drain the sink, pull the plug, but is suddenly afraid. The radio plays, and Daniel is silent, silent in the darkness of the bedroom, and the sink is filled with milk. And Tony cannot make his hands disturb that calm and secret surface.

Drome takes the fire stairs, two at a time. The elevators aren't responding. Not good at all. It must be the rats, he thinks, count on it. Gnawing away at the wires that summon the elevators. Cut off their avenues of movement, that's what he would do, if he were a clever little rodent general. Keep them isolated; sever the arteries. They don't believe in damage deposits, no sir, or waiting lists either.

2732 is unwell. The walls of the stairwell are damp with condensation. Gurgles and hisses not part of the normal metabolism, clearly audible in the halls. Elevators out of order.

Drome bypasses the lobby, takes another flight, bursts out onto the second floor. And everything appears peaceful. The standard nocturnal hush prevails. The third floor, too, is quiet, the fourth quiet as a mousetrap. Too quiet, perhaps. No sound of radio or television, or muted conversation leaking into the halls. It's

late, of course, has everyone turned into a pumpkin? Hurrying past the rows of doors, with their dark peepholes, Drome feels exposed, suddenly, almost silly.

He pauses to catch his breath. Perhaps he has misjudged the rats, overestimated their rate of social evolution. All the same, admit it, the building is unwell. There is a body in the basement, after all.

Drome climbs more sedately up the next flight of stairs, and finds the door to the fifth floor is locked. Not possible. These are fire doors, they have no locks. It's the code. He pushes at the door again. It gives only slightly, then stops. Drome tries to force it, but there is nothing to brace himself against. Something creaks on the other side, but the door moves no farther.

Drome raps on the door. "Hello?"

No answer from the other side.

"Barricading this door is a violation of fire regulations!" The echoes in the stairwell hurt his ears.

Nothing. Drome licks the sweat from his upper lip. It tastes vaguely of vodka.

Sixth floor. The door opens, at least. Drome steps through to see a naked man standing in the hall. Hearing the door, the man turns, sees Drome.

"I can't find my cigarettes," says the man, moving closer. "All I want is my cigarettes. Have you got a cigarette?" Just a few feet away, now.

Drome is unsure how to react. He attempts a Quick Smile of Recognition. The man counters with a Lingering Smile of Familiarity.

Drome retreats to the stairwell. Policy is silent on the issue of encounters with naked tenants. The fire door starts to open, and Drome hurries up another flight of stairs.

The seventh floor is in darkness. Even the emergency lights are off. The glowing EXIT sign above the stairway provides the only light. Drome moves carefully into the dark. Glass crunches underfoot. They've broken the lights, he realizes. Shattered the fluorescent tubes like pinatas.

A creak behind him. Drome turns to see light spilling in from the stairwell, then the fire door swings closed again

with a thump. He holds his breath. There is a surprised yelp from the darkness.

"Goddamn me." says the cigarette-man. "You know there's glass all over this carpet?"

Drome blunders down the hall toward the distant fire of the exit sign at the other end. Arms outstretched, pushing himself away from unseen walls. Crunching with every footstep, like running through rotten snow. He bounces off something softer than the wall, another person, it must be. Drome stumbles, goes down on hands and knees, glass tearing at his palms. On your feet, don't make a sound. And he's running again, through the other fire door, slamming it behind him. The sudden light makes him want to sneeze.

Another flight of stairs. Drome pauses on the landing, waiting for his heartbeat to slow. He pulls a splinter of glass from his palm, wincing. I feel unwell, he thinks, and takes a deep breath and goes through the door.

Those stairwells must be almost soundproof. The racket on the eighth floor is ungodly. There's a short little man halfway down the hall, pounding on a door with his cellular phone, screaming obscenities. Each blow from the phone fills the hallway with amplified thunder, followed by a lightning shriek of feedback.

Drome approaches the lunatic cautiously. Damaging the facilities. The green of the carpet is stained red, from the abused doorway down to the garbage chutes. Drome pauses. He had almost forgotten about the body. Clearly the little man is dangerous.

Just then a door across the hall flies open, and out steps a fat Italian in his undershirt, dangling a baseball bat from one hand.

"Hey!" he bellows. "Hey! Decent people are trying to sleep here. What the hell you think you're doing?" He pokes the lunatic with the end of the bat.

"Whack him." Drome yells. "Home run! What are you waiting for? Don't let him jump you."

The fat man turns to stare at Drome. "Who the fuck are you?" he asks.

The short man turns to stare at Drome. "Yeah, who the fuck are you?" he says into his phone, his words transformed into the voice of God booming out of the walls.

Drome takes a step back. "I'm the super." Straightens to his full height. "I'm in charge."

"I thought you were the super," says the cigarette-man, behind him. Drome looks around and sure enough, here he comes, the naked man, leaving a trail of bloody footprints on the carpet. "I was going down for some cigarettes," he says, "but the elevators aren't working. I thought you were supposed to fix that stuff."

"You're the super," says the lunatic, "then you have a key can get me into this room here."

"You in charge," says the Italian, "then get this asshole to shut up."

"You're the one with the bat," Drome points out.

"Damn right." He gives it a short swing, sinking the end in the plaster of one wall. "Guess that makes me the super. So I gotta ask, who the fuck are you? And what," advancing a step, "are you doing in my *building*?"

Drome retreats again, bumping into the cigarette man. "Scuse me," and he feints left, dodges right and is past him and running again for the exit. He is not a people person. That much is clear.

"Catch him!" the Italian shouts.

"Get his keys!"

"Take his cigarettes!"

Drome bangs through the door. Three at a time, another flight, skip the ninth floor, he can hear the tenants coalitions clattering up the stairwell after him. One last flight of stairs and the door to the roof stops him. "No Access" in screaming red letters. Drome fumbles for his keys, and the bat is clanging on the iron handrail below, find the right key, fight with the lock, cranky from years of disuse, and he's through, slamming the door on the gentry, and locking it behind him.

Let them bang on that for a while. That's a fire door, metal through and through.

Drome leans against the door, slides down until he is sitting, trying to catch his breath. The pounding on the other side could be distant as a stranger's heartbeat. The roof is still warm, and smells of tar, but the air is blessedly cool.

He hasn't been up here for years, but nothing has changed. A cluster of satellite dishes, and a few weeds somehow surviving without soil. A lightbulb is caged above the door, but the light doesn't penetrate far. The air is heavy with fog, or smoke, and the light loses its way after a few yards.

Drome moves away from the door, the banging fading behind him. He seems to recall fire escapes to the left, past an abandoned pile of lumber. One 'o clock in the morning, and the quiet up here is a mercy, the noise of the city barely audible. Just at the edge of hearing, Drome catches a hint of music, someone in a distant apartment, the radio on, their window open. It sounds lonely and familiar and he pauses, trying to remember where he might have heard it before.

"There you are," says a voice at his ear. "I thought I'd lost you."

And Drome suddenly feels too tired to even register surprise. He turns slowly, to see a ragged woman, her face old as the city, with ingenue eyes. "I'm back from under the hill," she says, and laughs. For no reason he can understand, Drome feels like laughing too.

"Come dance with me, Morris." Maria says, looking up at him. She smiles and takes his hand, warm and alive, in her own.

And they dance.

DARK WAITING

by Catherine Muntz

An unceasing rain,
Lamplight gold in the gutters.
I refold bat wings.



THE SERVITORS

by Jeffrey Thomas
illustrated by Robert E. Murphy

Skrey had chosen this as his day of emancipation.

He gave not the slightest indication of his plans, nor even of the discontent that had spawned them. He functioned as he had every day for the past four thousand years.

Skrey was an assistant feeder at the Twelfth Orifice. Kreve was crane operator and head feeder of this opening. At present, Kreve had had to shut down the feed crane in order to reset the great ring of black metal which held the circular wound open. As the wound attempted to heal, the ring was sometimes forced to contract. Kreve would set a huge crank to expand the ring and reclaim lost ground. First, however, he used a bladed pike, of the same black metal as the ring and the idle crane, to slice at the flesh which had begun to actually grow over the ring's rim. The severed fragments either stuck to Kreve's four multi-jointed grey arms, splatted at his bony cloven feet, or tumbled away into the great yawning crater of the orifice.

Standing almost on the opposite side of the vast wound, Skrey shoveled feed manually over the edge, digging a black metal spade into a black metal tub filled with a translucent sebaceous matter, yellow with coarse black hairs sprouting out of it. He heard the feed thump against the raw red throat of the wound occasionally, but had never heard it strike bottom.

Pausing from his labors, all four arms aching, he watched Kreve pick at the unwanted collar of flesh in his usual crude, sloppy manner. He left ragged strands dangling, wouldn't sweep the debris over the lip into the volcano-like maw. Skrey would have to clip those untidy shreds, clean up the rubble. When he excised the flesh he always did it neatly. When he, rarely, got to operate the crane he never splashed feed accidentally all over the lip. Skrey kept the crane oiled, scraped off rust and blood, where Kreve would let the machine become clogged almost to a halt, on his own. But who was still head feeder, after four thousand years? Who was the favorite of the Supervisor, and could do no

wrong? Yes, Skrey thought. *I could be a favorite also...if I treated the Supervisor like he was God.* But the Supervisor wasn't God; just another servitor, like the rest of them. A tiny, crawling nothing, scraping out his tiny existence on the planet-huge body of the Dreaming One. The One Who Slumbers. The Phantast. Now, *He* was God.

Kreve, the bastard. He had also been at fault for the death of Skrey's mate, four thousand years ago, when the drillers had first bored the Twelfth Orifice. Poor Mrek had been on the drill team. It had been the responsibility of both drill leader and Kreve, in setting up his crane, to ensure they had chosen a sound site to bore. But their check for parasites had been cursory. Just below the epidermis, the drill hit a great nest of plump writhing larvae, which in feasting had tunneled the immediate sub-layers profoundly. The drill lost its support and toppled into the fresh wound. Skrey remembered it now: the drill platform screeching metallicly, vanishing in the thick mist of blood which geysered up out of the wound. And the operators, trapped on the drill, screeching in horror. One of those voices had been Mrek's....

Kreve had only received light punishment: his four arms and two legs cut off and prevented from regenerating for forty years. Unbelievable. Skrey's only consolation had been that brief respite, working without Kreve, while the bastard lay in a dark corner somewhere, counting dust motes.

Mrek had never pulled herself up out of that maw, as two other drillers had. They'd caught hold of the sides, still offering ragged hand-holds, not yet fully bored smooth. Shaken, covered in blood and mucus, but alive. Mrek must have hit that far-away bottom. An ocean of bile, lost in the darkness beyond sight.

As he shoveled feed anew, Skrey imagined what it was like to die. The servitors had been created all but immortal. He had survived countless atrocious on-job accidents (most of them Kreve's fault). He was sure he had spawned a few fresh servitors that way. Vaguely he was

aware that he himself had started life as an arm jerked off a worker in a cleaning team when a wild hose got wrapped around it. Was that worker like himself? Disgruntled? Unhappy? And even angrier at his unhappiness?

Had the supervisor allowed Kreve's six severed limbs to clone themselves into full servitors? Dormant One -- he hoped not! Six more of the bastard....

Six more for Skrey to kill.

The servitors could die...if their bodies were fully and quickly dissolved. Or digested -- as in the unseen corrosive sea at the bottom of the giant well Skrey labored at every day.

Jean's eyes felt full and hard with the pain of her headache, like billiard balls in her skull. They were the only part of her that showed, ninja-like, in her white costume, and she even wore goggles to complete her disguise.

Through these aching lenses she watched the carousel turn, the jiggling ampules filling with a clear local anesthetic to be administered via hypodermic by dentists. Thousands of tiny tubes of pain-numbing elixir, none of it any good for the pain she felt now. They were a taunt. She imagined the deep stabbing of those thousands of needles.

Jean watched for crimps or dents in the little metal caps which her huge machine then sealed the ampules with. A dent could make an air bubble. Dangerous. She plucked these and broken ampules out with rubber-sheathed fingers. The carousel ended in a tray, the ampules squeezing their multitudes into it like people swarming out of a carnival ride. When it was full she paused the filler, removed the tray and inserted it through a hole in the wall to a person on the other side, whom she could see but not speak with. This was a woman who always seemed to have a look of amused scorn on her face, and who seemed to make comments about Jean to the others out there. They could watch her all night through the glass, like a creature in an aquarium.

Jean couldn't go get some aspirin. Not for two more hours, her next break. And

she shouldn't have had two coffees at supper: she would have to wait two more hours to relieve herself. Eight times a day she changed her clothes at work. Every time there was a break, all the outer garments of the sterile department -- hood, mask, jumpsuit, booties, gloves -- would be discarded...then, after break, a fresh outfit would be donned over her standard white uniform. All of it a blinding, eye-stabbing white. A termite white. Jean felt a rebellious urge to wear black or red underwear under all that sterile white, but was afraid that it would show through.

No conversation in sterile was audible over the roar of machinery, no lips could be seen to be read. There was no piped-in music, no walkmans allowed. There were no posters, no tacked up photos of children. Color, it seemed, had been forbidden. Just eyes...and though these were said to be the windows of the soul, the eyes Jean had contact with during the nights were dusty, showed no lights on inside, or seemed to have their shades drawn. She was sure that hers looked the same.

George, her immediate boss, came in and greeted her by motioning impatiently at the tank into which the great bags of metal caps were poured to keep them replenished. It was nearly empty. Jean knew this; she'd been keeping a peripheral eye on it. Hadn't she worked this job for five years now? But with huffy movements, George ripped open and dumped a fresh bag himself.

The tray was full; too full, as Jean had taken her eyes from it to look at George. It happened, but shouldn't while George was around. She paused the filler, slid the tray out, and, despite her attempts not to jar them, two dozen ampules lingering on the walkway between carousel and tray toppled off the precipice like a horde of lemmings, crashing to a floor already crunchy with glass, wet with pain-killer.

At the end of the shift she would suck up the glass with a vacuum hose down the floor, while the last dregs of the tank were drained. She could not go home, or even leave the room, until this was ac-

complished. She had complained once. "Overtime!" George had exclaimed. "How can you complain about overtime, in this economy?" But the nights were so long, and life so short....

George disgustedly caught up a mop and pushed the bulk of the mess away from her feet, against the wall until later. The mop bumped her feet roughly as he did so. Jean thought, then, that anyone who could not at least understand why a worker would slaughter supervisors and co-workers had never worked blue-collar.

Sometimes, as now, when Skrey concentrated hard or allowed a meditative calm to come over him, he could feel her. He turned his face of bony chitin up toward the roof of the cavern the Dreaming One reposed in, so distant and dark that it seemed the infinity of space itself. Beyond the infinity, he sensed her. She was her own being, and yet a version of himself, interpreted differently by the dimension she lived in, the plane she dwelt on. They were apart, yet connected. Did she ever sense his life?

She was a female of her kind, he knew that much. It didn't trouble him. What intrigued him was the softness of her flesh, and especially the brightness of her world. Every day she garbed herself in white, ritualistically, and entered a white place. Perhaps she was a priestess...

Skrey knew of her plane not only from this connection he had to it, but from what he'd heard from the caste of servitors called the explorers, who ventured into other dimensions to inspire cults of worship for the Phantast, and to destroy enemies. What a place of wonders they told of! Open skies of color, and, at night, stars.

Kreve came toward Skrey, carrying his pike. His mandibles chattered to admonish Skrey. "Dreaming again, friend? Leave dreaming for the master and shovel that feed! If the Master grumbles hungry in His sleep you'll wish you had been sent to work in the waste holes, when the Supervisor is done with you."

Skrey dug his shovel into the tub, swiveled his head to glance over his

shoulder. He saw no other workers from here. "Do you ever dream of freedom, Kreve?" he asked.

"There is no such thing as freedom. It is an abstraction. Even the Master is not free. He is trapped in His dreams."

"Death is freedom, though, is it not? Freedom from slavery? Freedom from pain?"

"Yes, fool, I suppose it is."

"Then I give you a gift, fellow slave." Skrey shoveled a blob of feed up into Kreve's face. Kreve sputtered, stumbled back, blindly tried to raise his pike, but too late. The shovel blade swung sideways against his skull like an ax.

Kreve plummeted over the lip. No hand-holds now. Slick mucus walls. Skrey did not hear him hit the sea of bile...just a screeching cry fading to nothingness.

"Be free," Skrey said.

The bottle of maximum strength aspirin sat on the top shelf of her locker. Also on the shelf, inside a paper lunch bag, was her boyfriend's cherished SIG-Sauer P-225 semiautomatic. Boy, would he kill her if he knew she'd smuggled it out of the house...not just tonight, but every night of the week thus far. But she had never taken it out of the bag, had returned it to its drawer each night when she got home. Lightly, she reached into the bag and touched the pebbled handle, the black metal. It had been a rebellious act, bringing this black blot into this white place. Like the panties she wanted to wear. ...

Roy, a plumber, owned his own house at twenty-six. Now he wanted to get married. He wanted children. Two and a half children, Jean thought. She did not want children.

"Why?" Roy had said. "Jesus! What kind of woman doesn't want children?"

She couldn't answer that. There might be many answers. A woman who simply did not care for those particular responsibilities? Who did not want to give away her life to others when she could be living it herself? A woman who did not see why she had to propagate a species

whose worthiness of continuation was questionable?

Well, Roy had gone on, in essence, what do you want to do? What else is life for? To produce and reproduce. Like a good sheep. But Jean had once dreamed of traveling, of exploring, of being everything she could be, like they told you in school. Only she had found in her twenties that you couldn't be all you could be. You couldn't *really*, ultimately, be what you wanted. There were limits. Walls. Society was bigger and stronger and had its own agenda. Oh, it sounded like a cop-out, even to herself...but it was true, wasn't it?

The pain was so great in her head, in the agonized orbs she stared through, she doubted the aspirin could help her now. Maybe if she took the whole bottle, it could help her. Cure her. Maybe then....

Instead, she removed the heavy paper bag from the locker. She slipped the chunky gun into the waistband of her pants, pulled her shirt down over it. No, its blackness didn't show through. Good. She felt better. She would smuggle some personality back into the sterile department. A chunk of identity, a piece of self, compacted like a collapsed star into a heavy black core of anger.

Skrey rode a feed conveyer belt most of the way to the First Orifice, jumped off before the crew there could spot him. The absence of the feeders at the Twelfth Orifice would have been noticed by now, but the Supervisor would not guess Skrey's destination....

He worked his way into the forest, in and around the immense trunks of the Dreamer's tentacles, stirring translucent far above or flopped over, their tips almost brushing the floor of tough wrinkled flesh. Several times Skrey ducked behind a trunk as a cleaner crew moved by. At last, he reached one of the narrow cauterized tunnels leading to the headquarters of the explorers....

More ducking, here, more stealthiness; the explorers looked different enough for Skrey's presence to be noticed. Finally, one explorer asked his purpose. Skrey

chattered. "I'm a feeder, off-duty. come to visit my friend Gret."

Gret was not truly a friend, but the explorer was satisfied with this explanation and waved Skrey on.

Skrey wound his way deeper into the lair of the explorers, brushing past several more of that caste, muttering his same successful story a few times, until he entered at last into the Chamber of Portals. There were no guards at the entrance; no one had thought to enter this place before with questionable intent. Only once prior had Skrey come here, with a few other feeders and an explorer they'd bribed, just to look through the portals and marvel. Skrey had never forgotten. How could Kreve have suggested that freedom was an illusion? Every one of the round windows ringing this chamber hewn from flesh was a window on freedom.

This room was close to the outside of the brain of the Slumbering Master, and it was His mind that dreamed open the doors into these other worlds, these alternate realities. Some portals showed only seething fog, or writhing light. One showed the dark depths of an ocean. An ocean of water, not bile! Did Skrey have a self in that realm, and if so was it an intelligent being or a simple animal? Even living in that sea as a mindless animal, free to swim where it chose, would be liberation ...

But he had only ever felt the connection to the female who wore white, the soft-fleshed being in the world of humans. It was her world he wanted to escape to. It was with her he wanted to be.

She would never have met a being like him. She would be horrified, but he would persuade her to accept him, and help him establish a life in some safe region. And she would help him. She would realize their connection. That she and he were the same many-faced soul.

An explorer entered the chamber and Skrey pivoted his head. He recognized Gret.

"I am told you are looking for me, feeder?"

*

Jean removed the tray from the carousel. She had not, however, paused the carousel. As though mesmerized, she watched it turn, a slow whirlpool, a vortex, drawing her in. . .

The gleaming glass parade of ampules marched straight off the cliff edge to dash themselves on the floor between Jean's feet.

The amused/scornful woman outside the sterile department had come over to receive the tray but now began rapping on the glass, pointing at the carousel. Jean ignored her.

Peripherally, Jean saw her boss join the woman. He rapped more loudly on the glass. Still she didn't look. The ampules became a small jagged pile, even across her booty-covered sneakers. A blur as her boss moved from the window.

This carousel was her life. Circles. It took her nowhere. And she was just one of many ampules. No. Not just any. One of the ones with a dented cap. One of the ones with an air bubble. One of the dangerous ones....

Skrey felt vaguely guilty smashing Gret with the wrench he had brought with him from the crane, but he knew the explorer would regenerate. Of course, before he set upon him he had had the sense to ask, in a casual tone, which of the portals led to the world of humans.

More explorers came, responding to Gret's shrieks. From the floor he pointed a limb at one of the portals lining the circular room. "He passed through there?" he croaked. "He must be mad!"

"He will be directed to his alternate!" cried a young explorer who had never journeyed into that place. "He will be revealed!"

"Don't worry," Gret groaned, pulling himself up. "He won't be noticed."

"Shall we go after him?"

"We don't know who his alternate is, do we?" Gret shook his cracked, bleeding head. "He's not worth tracking down, the crazy fool. He's just a feeder."

When the boss came in the room, fully suited, Jean heard his roaring over the roaring of the machine and the tinkle of

glass. She turned to welcome him with a roar which blotted out his roar. A glittering brass shell leaped to join the ampules. Another.

The white wall behind the boss was suddenly vivid with color. His pristine uniform became splattered with a deep beautiful red. He went crashing back, pinwheeling his arms. His eyes were wide and horrified in his goggles. Windows of the soul with the shades spinning. The lights went out in them as he dragged his color down the wall. White canvas splashed with paint; Jean felt like an artist.

Now she turned to fire the SIG through the window-wall. Confusion had already wiped the scorn from the woman's face. Jean obliterated the potential for its return. The shower cap-like hair-covering the woman wore protected her hair from the blood.

Now the air outside communicated with that inside the sterile department. Oh-oh. The company wouldn't approve of that.

Jean peeled off her hood, tossed aside her goggles. She inhaled deeply and smiled, as if divesting herself of her mask was the most radical action she had taken.

She fired the next two bullets into the carousel's control panel. It came to a halt, the last ampules rolling off to shatter.

She heard screams beyond the window, saw darting forms. Termites exposed to the terrors of the world and scampering for fresh shelter, new rocks to hide under.

Jean placed the muzzle of the SIG between her eyebrows and hooked both thumbs over the trigger. She was sure the bullet would be the equal of her headache. It would end all her pain, in fact. It would sever her bonds, cut her tethers, and set her free.

Skrey floated through a vortex of blackness, of nothingness and allness, as if sucked down a whirlpool. A tunnel traversing space and time. He was drawn by some current, or propelled by the Master's unending dreams.

Though this tunnel led to only one of the infinite realities, Skrey still had an odd consciousness of his own infinity. He felt, simultaneously, something of the existence of all his many parallel forms...an incomprehensible bombardment of sensations. Distantly, he sensed himself battling in a war. Crying, hopeless, somewhere else. Dying in some worlds...being born in a thousand others. It was exhilarating and terrifying. He was a bullet shot through the very clockworks of the wheel of life. He could never know all the manifestations of himself. Could never know himself in his vast entirety. Just the little piece that he was. That, and the woman he was rushing onward to meet.

Like yet another soul being born, he perceived a circular light ahead -- opening like an eye onto his destination -- and then he was through that portal. The portal closed behind him, was gone. The tunnel itself was gone. It had bored itself ahead to link him with his alternate self, and no one who sought to pursue him could know who in this world that might be. He had succeeded! He had escaped. ...

The light, as in his vision of this plane, was dazzling -- blinded him. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust...and then what he saw dazzled him more than the light.

The monster Skrey gazed up at in awe was not so huge as the Dreaming One, would still be infinitely small in comparison, but towered nonetheless. Unlike the Master, this creature could be taken in by the eyes all at once...and Skrey recognized it as a human.

Had he actually been friends with Gret, the explorer's knowledge could have spared him this shock of realization.

Skrey realized then precisely where the portal had deposited him. He stood upon the great supine form of his soul-mate. Was she sleeping, dreaming? The white-clad behemoth moved toward her, now bending. The horror of its visage! Could the Phantast Himself be so hideous? In terror, Skrey bolted for the nearest shelter. A forest of slim trunks he could hide in, reminding him of the Master's far huger tentacles. On the way, Skrey

crossed a shallow pond of red fluid, with a current as it spread. He traced it to its source; a raw orifice, freshly bored. The monster leaned close over his alternate self. Had it spotted him, minuscule as he was? Skrey took no chances. He scurried into that orifice against the tide of blood.

Time passed in alien quantities. Skrey burrowed himself a safe nook. No parasites large enough to threaten him appeared. He could tell his parallel self was lifted, moved, transported. By this time, he had guessed the truth. She was dead....

Poor mortal thing. But even in dying, she helped him find shelter. He only wished he could have communicated with her, known her....

He went on living in her. Feeding on her. He was alert to the possibility that her kind would burn or dissolve her, but they buried her far below the ground in a container, much as the Dreamer had been buried in His deep cavern. Skrey ventured out at last, saw the container would be hard to escape from, even small as he was...

...but it would decay, weaken, in time. Until then he had all of his other self to explore, and feed on. And when her nourishment ran out he would survive his hunger, as he was virtually immortal. One day, a hundred years from now or a thousand, he would make his way to the surface. See the open sky for the first time, and the stars at night. He was not concerned. He was patient. He was elated.

He was free.

Mren was a cleaner in the waste holes, hosing out the foul matter of the Phantast's processed nourishment. It was the least enviable of the servitors' positions, but she had put in for work on a feed team. It would be a wait, as she was a young servitor, only freshly born.

She was a servitor born from an egg, rather than cloned from a lost limb, but still she had a sense of a prior life. This was not unusual, she was told, when one had been born of regeneration, but rare for the egg-born. Still, not unknown. Her fellow workers told her that she might be

catching a sense of a previous existence, a soul banished from one realm to find fresh expression in another.

This explanation soothed her somewhat, but it could be a very disquieting sensation. Memory fragments surfaced at times unexpectedly, shocking her. Whiteness, blinding, loomed in her consciousness. Strange noises, strange machinery. Jarring violence.

The most horrible sensation of all was that at times she felt a horror of herself, a self-loathing almost as sharp as panic. As if that other self had awakened in her to find itself transformed into a nightmare. A demon. Trapped in a new body it couldn't run out of, escape from.

Mren's work made her restless. And these waking dreams made her restless. But she told herself someday things would get better. ❖

Beloved
by Joey Froehlich

Killing Echo
With my gun
May be fun
In the mountains
As a flower
Is born
And she dies
In the pool
Of her blood,
A mirror
Of her own --
That scream
Cut off before
Very long
And she's immortal
No more,
Only lost
In the dust
And yesterday's
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WHAT IF STALIN DIED IN 1939?

by Ivan Martynov
translated by Faina Koss

**Kir Bulychov, *The Reservation for Scientists*.
Moscow: Text, 1994. 662 pp.**

It seems incredible that the idea of creating this sort of novel could have seemed insane to a Soviet writer not so long ago. In a totalitarian state it was impossible to speak of a universe in which tyrants of the present and past* could be abolished by an author's whim to change the flow of history. The last few years have seen the publication of several historical works investigating the possibility of Stalin's murder by his closest comrades, i.e., people who knew they would be the aging despot's next victims (Novoye Russkoye Slovo, March 4, 1996). Kir Bulychov, a veteran of Soviet science fiction, adds interesting new twists to this topic.

Isaac Asimov, in his novel *The End of Eternity*, introduced the idea of layers of space-time. The layers implied the existence of multiple universes, capable of branching out at critical moments. Asimov's idea found many followers in American science fiction. An old Russian proverb translates roughly as "What would happen if...?" This 'if,' its roots steeped in imagination of Asimov and his followers (e.g., Len Deighton, author of *SS--GB*, and Robert Harris, author of *Fatherland*), has given rise to spectacular visions.

In their novels, apocalyptic pictures of Hitler's victories in W.W.II serve to show the workings of History's clock, which annihilates all the totalitarian, racist regimes. The 'animated' Hitler is just as doomed to

destruction and defeat after the victory of the Reich as was his living prototype in April 1945, in the flames of Berlin.

Kir Bulychov, on the other hand, refuses to prolong the lives of this century's most famous tyrants. He kills them off one by one in the fall of 1939. Of course, this is happening in a parallel universe created by Bulychov. This time it is the fate of a famous Russian physicist, Matvey Shavlo, that serves as the watershed of history (it is possible Matvey Shavlo is a literary double of famous mathematician Matvey Bronshtein, who was tortured to death in one of Stalin's concentration camps). The author resurrects Matvey and places him at the very top of the GULAG hierarchy. There Matvey creates the first Soviet atomic bomb, the first in the world.

The novel begins with an idyllic description of the daily routine at a Soviet resort. Although quite poor, resorts like the one described in the book were reserved for the Soviet elite; the poet Boris Pasternak and the famous botanist Vavilov lived there. This seemingly realistic story quickly metamorphoses into phantasmagoria of the monstrous CHEKA.

For Matvey Shavlo, the question "To be or not to be?" is about the existence or total annihilation of Oykumena, which is our civilization, or reality. Shavlo calculates 'survival costs' for people born after the first atomic bomb is dropped on Warsaw. The bomb is then captured by Hitler in 1939. The novel ends with the Fuhrer's death as captured by Hitler in 1939. Yet the cessation of the tyrants' physical lives does not bring either hope or stability to the world, since Hitlerism and Stalinism are still alive.

This is the lesson a reader learns from Kir Bulychov's dynamic and fascinating novel. The book gives a picture of Soviet reality, rich with grim detail. It is Bulychov's belief in the final victory of the (power of the) higher mind that brings him close to his American colleagues.

*See the novel by Andrey Anikin, *The Death in Dresden*, about the early death of Napoleon in 1812. In his book *Second Life* (Moscow, 1988) with forward by Kir Bulychov.



*Taken from the Journals of Donald.
Lord Allan of Strathallan
January 25th 1744*

I arrived at the castle frozen to the bone, with my horse lame in two legs. Snow whipped around my face like biting flies and the wind whistled like a banshee in my ears. I was never happier to see a lump of rock in my life.

Dunnotar Castle sits on a rocky outcrop, jutting out into the sea like the prow of a giant boat. The stone buildings rise almost seamlessly out of the cliffs; it is hard to see where nature stops and man's work begins. It is even harder to see when wind is screaming and snow falling in an endless white sheet.

A single light led me across the causeway, and a single guard took my horse and showed me to the Great Hall.

"Donald, Lord Allen of Strathallan." A doorman announced my presence in the room. Ten heads turned to watch as I strode the expanse of floor, trying not to seem too eager as I made my way to the fire and got my hands as close to the flames as I dared.

Nine months in the desert had made me particularly aware of just how cold my homeland was. On a night like this, with six inches of snow and a howling gale, I wished I had never returned. But then I would have missed my triumph.

I felt the heaviness of the thing as it hung on my chest, cold metal against my skin, but I left it there. I had to time this right.

The feeling came back to my hands as I turned from the roaring embers and faced the room. A flagon of mulled wine was thrust at me from my right.

"Here. Get this inside o' ye." Jamie, Tenth Earl of Dunnotar and Defender of the Crown's regalia, was a big man, six feet tall, broad of shoulder, with flaming red hair and a beard in which you could have hidden a family of mice.

His face flickered redly in the flames. When the candlelight glinted in his eyes he looked like the devil himself. Then he laughed, and the spell was broken.

"Your sojourn amongst the barbarians

FLOWER OF SCOTLAND by William Meikle

illustrated by Stephen F. Schwartz

has enfeebled ye, eh, man?" A huge meaty palm slapped me on the back, almost making me spill my wine as he laughed again. "Never mind. Come meet the gentry. We've some women here that'll bring colour back to your cheeks."

I avoided another slap on the back as I followed him across the room. I hadn't expected a social gathering, just to get straight to the business. Jamie obviously had his own games to play. I would have to wait until the main player arrived.

Making polite conversation had never been a favourite pastime of mine, and I'm afraid that I bored the fine ladies of the court. My mind was forever wandering back to the desert, back to that dark sepulchre where my long quest had reached its end.

Again I touched the cold metal at my chest, and again I felt its power, its need. It had been growing stronger on my journey, sensing we were nearing its home, the place where it still had its old, legendary strength. I hoped we knew what we were doing.

I stood alone by the fireplace, trying vainly to warm the chill in my bones, when the doorman made the announcement I had been waiting for.

"Robert, Lord of Arran, High Steward of Ayrshire, Grand Master of the Kil-winning chapter."

With a build up like that you might expect a formidable figure, but the man who came in looked like he was struggling to live up to his moniker. His dress was fine enough, all wolf's fur and soft leather, but the body inside had been racked by too much illness. He could no longer stand straight, his back hunched in a twisted curve. His hair hung across his scalp in a lank wave and his beard was as fine as duck down. Only his eyes seemed truly alive as he came across the room and took my hand.

"Donald," he said, with genuine warmth in his voice. "I knew you would return. Do you have it?"

"I have it." I patted at my breast to show it was safe.

He did a jig of excitement, the reflected firelight dancing in his eyes, then

clasped me around the shoulders. I had to stoop to allow him the embrace.

"May I see it?" His voice was so low I had to strain to hear, but before I could reply he pushed himself away. "No. It must stay hidden until the right time."

I suddenly realized just how long I had been away. There was a spread of grey in Robert's hair, a grey that had not been there when I left.

"So, Donald, do ye have tales to tell, wonders to relate? I'll wager those barbarian beauties taught you a new trick or two," Jamie bellowed, coming up beside me and pushing another full goblet of mulled wine into my right hand.

"Can you not see it?" Robert's voice was still barely above a whisper. "It shows in his eyes. He is not the boy we sent away these three years ago. Aye, he has tales to tell, and not all of them fit for polite company, I'm bound. But come with me, Donald," he said, taking me away from the fire. "You can tell me some of your story, at least."

I was reluctant to leave the warmth, but the mulled wine was doing its job, heating me from within, and Robert had a right to hear. It was he who'd sent me on my way, all those years ago.

I didn't bore him with details of the journey itself. It had been slow and mainly dull, and that wasn't what he wanted to hear, anyway.

"It was where the Knights of Malta said it would be." Saying it sent my mind back, so that, although talking to Robert, I was almost dreaming of the events in that distant land, in that dark and forbidding tomb.

We had been at the site nearly six months, with little company but the shit and the heat and the flies. The temple had long ago been covered by sand, buried by the wrath of Allah according to the locals I employed to aid me. With diligence and much back-breaking work we slowly uncovered its splendour, its massive columns and the fine mosaics of its floor, the dry, dead ruins of a glorious past.

Finding the entrance to the catacomb had been harder, but I had the drawing Robert gave me and, one evening, just as

the stars were bursting into the sky, I found myself standing in front of a black hole leading into the earth.

I didn't want to go in. I've never been one for scurrying around in holes, that was more Robert's style, but if the promised treasure was within, I would to go get it. Too much depended on me for it to be thrown away on a sudden chill and a sense of foreboding.

The natives refused to go with me. Alone, with only a single smoking oil lamp, I put my foot over the threshold.

The flickering lamp sent shadows dancing over the walls like capering devils. My feet disturbed small clouds of dust to float wraith-like in the air before me. Rough-hewn steps led down to where the darkness was thicker and the silence fell over me like a shroud.

Great stone coffins lined the walls, stone figures sleeping above the mortal remains of the great knights, lamp-light flickering in grey-black eye sockets. I tried not to think of the years that had passed since anyone had walked among these dead.

I struggled to peer through the gloom. The light from the lamp barely reached the walls. Then I caught it, the barest gleam of red, as if answering my own faint light. As I got closer the glow intensified until its source was revealed: the great figure recumbent upon a coffin I knew for certain was empty.

It was just as the knight had said. The carving was so life-like I felt the great man could sit up and greet me, and there, in the gloom of the tomb, it didn't seem too unlikely.

The red glow deepened around the carved chest as I approached. I suddenly felt hot and sticky with sweat.

It was there, on top of the coffin, the small iron lattice enclosing the object of my quest, and the source of the red glow was within that lattice.

I was finding it difficult to breathe. My feet didn't want to take me any closer. I forced myself onwards.

Suddenly there was a creak, a rasp of stone against stone. I had a vision of the tombs behind me opening and their long dead occupants pulling themselves out of

their sleep, skeletal arms reaching for me.

I took what I had come for and left, hastily, grateful to get back out into the cool night.

"So the temple was there," Robert said to himself. "Just where they said it would be." He looked up at me. There were tears in his eyes. "Thank you. For myself, for my ancestor whom you have vindicated, and for future generations of Scotsmen who will know you as a hero."

He seemed to want to say more but turned away from me, ashamed of his tears. I was about to reach out for him when a huge hand grasped my shoulder. I turned to see Jamie's wide-eyed, slack-mouthed grin. He had drunk too much, but that was part of what made him Jamie; I expected no less from him.

"So, laddie," he said to Robert. "Are ye satisfied? Are we going to have your wee show?"

Robert nodded. "Aye. It is time. Come with me."

"What is this all about?" I asked Jamie as we followed Robert's bent figure. He wouldn't answer at first; I had to ask him again before he deigned to reply.

"Robert has found a use for yon trinket of yours."

"I thought it was to be a symbol. A focus for the clans in battle."

"Aye. It'll be a focus, all right, but if what wee Robert has in mind comes to pass, it'll be more than that, much more."

He wouldn't say any more as he led me further from the fire, towards the door. I had one last look backwards as we left the room, but the rest of the occupants seemed to be pointedly ignoring us, trying too hard not to note our passing.

Snow hit me full in the face as the door closed behind me. The wind howled its rage in my ears. Far below, waves beat hungrily at the cliffs, flecks of white spume flinging high to mingle with the white, dancing flakes of the storm.

"A fine night for it," Jamie bellowed in my ear, even his great voice torn away by the wind. I was unable to reply; I had enough trouble fighting the wind. We followed Robert through the grounds of

the castle to the chapel at the east end, high above the sucking sea.

A great oak door, four inches thick, swung shut behind us as we entered, shutting out the sounds of the storm, leaving us alone in thick, quiet darkness. Robert struck a light. At first all I could see was his face, lit from underneath by the candle, its light throwing the upper half into deep black shadow.

Only when my eyes became accustomed to the darkness did I realise what was about to occur.

The chapel windows had been covered in thick green velvet drapes, and the wooden seats removed from the room, leaving only empty boards before the altar. On the floor, a circle within a circle had been drawn, circles surrounded by dense Hebrew script. A five pointed star was inscribed inside the inner circle, and a candle placed at each point of the star.

A cold chill settled in my bones, answered by a sudden burst of heat from the thing around my neck.

"It is time," Robert said. "Fetch it out, Donald."

The red light blazed between both the lattice and my fingers as I opened my vest and took the chain from 'round my neck. Robert took it gingerly between thumb and forefinger, as if it might burn him.

"Remember," he said to both of us. "You must not enter the circle until the conjuration is complete."

Jamie and I nodded in unison. It was not the first summoning we had attended, but I had the feeling it would be the most memorable.

The chapel got perceptibly colder as Robert stepped into the circle. I missed the comfort of the ancient chain around my neck; it had been with me for a long time. As if in answer to my thoughts, the lattice blazed redly one last time before fading. Robert raised his hands towards the roof and began to chant.

Powers of the Kingdom, be ye under my left foot and in my right hand. Glory and Eternity, take me by the two shoulders and direct me in the paths of victory. Mercy and Justice, be ye the equi-

librium and splendour of my life. Intelligence and wisdom, crown me.

Spirits of Malcuth, lead me betwixt the two pillars upon which rest the edifice of the temple. Angels of Nestah and Hod, strengthen me upon the cubic stone of Jesod.

Oh Gedulael, Oh Geburael, Oh Tiphereth, Bineal, be thou my love.

Ruach Hochmael, be thou my light. Be that which thou art and thou shalt be.

Oh Jethriel Tschim, assist me in the name of Saddai, be my strength in the name of Adonai.

Oh Beni-Elohim, be my brethren in the name of the Son and by the power of Zebaoth.

Elohim, do battle for me in the name of Tetragrammaton.

Malachim, protect me in the name of Jod He Vau He.

Seraphim, cleanse me in the name of Elvoih.

Hajoth a Kadosh, cry, speak, roar, bellow.

Lion of the North, be with me.

Robert was enveloped in a red glow, a glow that grew and spread from the object on the chain, a glow that moulded itself around his body, obscuring his features as it deepened and took on shape. Robert seemed to expand, his back straightening, his chest filling out, his face melting like wax on a candle.

He groaned, a loud moan of pain. Jamie stepped forward. I only just stopped him in time. It would have been death for all of us had he crossed the circle then.

Both Robert and the source of the glow disappeared inside the growing shape in front of us. As the shape coalesced it formed the figure of a man, giant of stature and imperious in his stance. His blue eyes stared unblinking at us. We stared back, struck dumb by the vision.

"Well?" he finally said. His accent was strong, but the gist came through. "Why have you called me here?" He had the bearing of a soldier, and his voice held the tone of command, so much so that my legs trembled and my tongue stuck to my palate.

Jamie had no such trouble. "We need you. Sir. Your country needs you. These are perilous times in your homeland."

The figure threw back his head and laughed, a great bellowing which shook the room. "Has it come to this? Have you become so weak?" He laughed again. I felt like cowering before him, but Jamie became angry.

"You cannot deny us. We need the old strength."

"You would command me?" the figure said, his voice low, his eyes betraying anger. "You cannot live in the past. Each generation must fight its own battles. Live for now, not for a time which will never return. Leave me in peace. I long ago played my part in this mummery."

The red glow began to fade, imperceptibly at first. Soon we could see Robert's tortured frame writhing in its midst.

"No!" Jamie shouted. Before I could stop him, he stepped forward into the circle. And Hell came to Dunnotar.

The red cloud writhed and flowed, enveloping Jamie like a huge velvet cloak. The great door blew open, metal screaming as the massive hinges were torn loose, wind howling as the door fell to the floor with a thunderclap crash.

Within the circle the cloud shrank, smaller, then smaller still, the figures within shrinking along with it. The last thing I heard before silence fell was Jamie's voice, falling away in the distance, as he pleaded over and over for mercy.

I was alone in a suddenly silent room. All that was left in the circle was the ancient chain, still carrying the lattice, contents still gleaming like fiery amber.

I stepped into the circle, muscles tensed in expectation of attack. There was only the sound of the wind as I lifted the chain and headed out into the night.

I thought of the past, of the great victory over Edward's army, of the Earl of Douglas taking this selfsame chain to the Crusades, of the centuries it had lain in its tomb.

I imagined the distant marching drums of the English Army as I raised my arm and sent the heart of Robert the Bruce to its final resting place. ❖

Straddling Worlds by William J. Gagnon

she stood fixed to
the telescope
on their new deck.
dull in-law and
mouthy kid droned
from window screens
and drifted by
on whisper of
citronella
and cigarette
while small pearly
planets huddle
in the eyepiece
steamed peas in a
cosmic kitchen
flat but vivid.
she hung a small
radio dish
on her ear to
catch the bleeps of
distant pulsars
and put a pinch
of ammonia
in one nostril
to simulate
the burn of a
gas giant.
she needed to
wear this sky of

ebony fur
up to her chin,
limbs buried in
fold and pocket.
and longed to throw
herself into
the mad traffic
of outer space
and wouldn't that
be just perfect?
she could have morphed
into a light
wave right then and
joined the big bash.
her hand followed
the curve of a
lunar hill and
strummed nebulae
shaped like golden
gorgons, but she
kept one toe curled
firmly around
the safety net
of earth below.
tonight she was being cautious.
tomorrow night
maybe it would
be different.

Dream Pillow I by Lorraine Schein

Her dream pillow was inducing too many dreams. Some of them were lucid enough to escape and got caught by the dream catcher over her bed, which scooped them up and netted them back into the pillow like basketballs through a hoop, where their scents mingled with its lavender, mugwort and hops.

Several of them gave off the power-stench of nightmares, burning flesh and sulfur; others had the mild, pleasant lemony laundry-like odor of everyday dreams. The lucid ones smelled like the

smoke of lit molten glass; the sexual ones of musk, sweat and smegma. But the precognitive dreams were the worst. They smelled of decayed, screaming black hole roses.

She ripped her pillow open and all her trapped dreams spilled out, in a profusion of smell, image, and noise. She opened the window wider to let them out and air the room.

One of them got caught in her hair and became reality. ❖

In My Humble Opinion

WHAT TO DO, WHAT TO DO?

by Norm Hartman

Here is a problem for you: You are *old!* You are nearing your eighth decade in good health and with mental faculties intact, but you certainly don't have anywhere near the physical and mental energy that was yours at your peak. Your family has all passed on or drifted away. One day, your doctor calls you in for a conference. You can be a test subject for a new treatment that will return you to a physical age of about thirty. Not only that, but you can repeat this treatment as often as necessary. This test must be kept secret; you will be given a new identity.

You take the treatment, it is all that was promised and there are no bad side effects. You are *young* again!

Now for the big question. What are you going to do with your new life? Will you go back to your old profession, whatever it was? Will you forge a new career, and if so, what will it be? What are you going to do with this new lifetime you have been granted? Think about it, talk it over with your friends, and let me know what you decide.

Now for the *really* big question: What happens when this treatment becomes readily available at little or no cost to the general public, not only in our country, but all around the globe? What controls must be imposed on population growth, and how can they possibly work? How do young people find jobs when we old farts no longer die off, retire, or otherwise leave the work force? What happens when the 'teeming masses' no longer are limited to a few short decades of mindless work, and have time to think about what they really want to do with their lives? Will they really sit on their duffs and watch sitcoms for the next thousand years? These are only the first and most obvious problems we will face within our life-

times, so you'd better start thinking about them now! Again, tell me your answers.

One author who has studied this problem and some of its consequences is Elizabeth Moon, though she has placed the action far away in a future where the treatment is available to only a very few, at great expense. Three books she has written are.

Hunting Party, by Elizabeth Moon; Baen Publishing Enterprises, Riverdale NY, July 1993; pb, 364pp, \$5.99

Captain Heris Serrano, forced to resign under a cloud from the Space Service of her interstellar kingdom, has been hired to captain the yacht *Sweet Delight*, owned by rich, elderly Lady Cecelia. In the process of shaking down her new command she runs afoul of smugglers, incompetent crew members and, finally, the villainous Admiral Lepescu, the man behind all her troubles in the Fleet.

She also learns to ride to hounds, the passion of her employer Lady Cecelia, and stumbles upon a scheme to hunt criminals as though they were mere animals. This book is your introduction to her world of high finance and interstellar intrigue. The cover is by Stephen Hickman, but I don't consider it one of his best.

Sporting Chance, By Elizabeth Moon; Baen Publishing Enterprises, Riverdale NY, September 1994; pb, 383pp, \$5.99.

In her previous book, Captain Serrano and her employer, Lady Cecelia, discovered one of the participants in the 'hunting club' was Geral, Crown Prince of the Kingdom, whose stupidity had allowed him to become involved. Stupidity? Among royalty whose genetic structure has been enhanced by the best methods? This isn't England, after all. Something is wrong here!

In the struggle to unravel this mess, Lady Cecelia is struck down and left in a coma by an apparent stroke, Captain Serrano is suspected of poisoning her, and the Prince must be transported to a distant system to see if he can be cured of his 'stupidity.' Along the way we encounter such diverse subjects as stealing a space yacht, hot-air balloon racing, the breeding of horses, the consequences of cloning people and the economics

of spaceship interior decorating. We also see how a series of poor decisions can bring down a government. This book's excellent cover is by Gary Ruddell.

Winning Colors, by Elizabeth Moon; Baen Publishing Enterprises, Riverdale NY, August 1995; pb, 409pp, \$5.99

The problem of the stupid prince has been resolved, the government brought down and replaced by a more responsible regime, and the Lady Cecelia has been nursed back to health and rejuvenated. All of Captain Serrano's problems have been overcome and all is well. Isn't it?

Well, not quite. There is hanky-panky on an interstellar scale, involving such diverse elements as a deep-space invasion by an interstellar Mafia, meddling with the source of longevity drugs, and various economic skullduggeries. Captain Serrano is forced to, among other things, pirate a Royal Navy task force to fight off said invasion.

Along the way, much thought is given to the short-term and long-term effects of the longevity treatment on individuals young and old as well as society as a whole. This series is highly entertaining, with excellently drawn characters and exciting action, and should make you think as well as entertain you.

The cover art by David Mattingly is superb. Pick up all three of these books, and keep them to reread when you want something to sink your teeth into. Very highly recommended, individually and as a series.

See you again next issue, with more comments and recommendations.

Authors and publishers who wish books considered for review, please send copies and comments to:

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SEASONS

by Barbara Malenky
illustrated by Barb Armata

knock...knock...knocky-knocky...knock
“Fireman got a woman?” Betty whispered from under the blankets.

Gloria lay still and listened.

knocky...knock

“I guess so...sounds like.” She burrowed further under the covers.

“Where’d he get her?” Betty asked.

“I don’t rightly know. Why don’t you go ask him yourself?”

Betty sat up and stared down at the lump that was her sister.

“You don’t have to be so hateful, Miss Priss. It hasn’t kept you up the last hours. I just don’t know when he had time to find himself a woman between our pulling in last night and now. That’s all I’m asking.”

Gloria pulled the pillow over her head. Once Betty was riled up, she’d never stop whining. The bed shifted as her sister dangled her feet off the side.

“He beats all I’ve seen.” Betty’s voice rose. “Nothing’s ever enough. It don’t matter a twit that we haven’t had a decent night of rest all season.”

Gloria reached out to touch Betty’s arm. “Get back in bed. He’ll stop in a minute.”

But it was too late. Betty stood up. After a few moments, the room flooded with light as she pulled open the curtains.

“Might as well get up. No use trying to sleep whilst Fireman’s got a woman. He don’t have a bit of respect.”

Gloria peeked at her sister. She seemed to have gotten wider over the season. Her form near filled the window.

“I don’t see a car,” Betty observed. “Probably some old roadwhore like he usually finds.” She came back to the bed and slapped at Gloria’s raised rump. “Come on, get up. We can start unloading the trailers. John and Harlem’s already out there.” She tugged at the bedclothes. “You got three months to catch up on your sleep.”

“Let me alone.” Gloria whined. “I’m just bone tired.”

“Fine. I reckon you’d rather stay in here and listen to Fireman getting his kicks than be out helping the ones who care about you. I’ll be sure and tell

them.” She gathered her clothes and headed out the door.

Gloria sighed. For all the aggravation, it was still good to be home and off the road. Unable to face the coldness of the bedroom, she rolled on her sister’s side, vacant but still warm as toast.

knock...knock...knocky-knocky...knock said the wall.

Sometimes, when the carnival season was over, the owner, Mr. Walker, came around with bonuses. Gloria and Betty then had enough to catch the bus to Florida where they vacationed with a cousin who lived in the Everglades. This season had been poor, however, and the women had to spend this year’s off months holed up in their allotted trailer, shared with another carnival worker, namely Fireman.

Mr. Walker owned a hundred acres of land in Tennessee. The workers and equipment were housed in the northeast pasture section of his property during the cold months. Ten trailers, identical in size and shape, were parked in a circle around a fair-sized fishing pond, used as an extra source of water. Equipment trucks were pulled behind the trailers as a buffer to ward off the harsh winter winds from their living quarters. Each two bedroom trailer was shared by three or four workers; the rule being married, family and good friends share quarters. Remaining workers paired off to share the leftover odd space. At present, only Fireman enjoyed the luxury of a private room...and he had begun an insatiable adventure in securing the pleasures of the flesh.

By the time Gloria dressed and headed for the big trucks full of carnival equipment, more than half the workers were outside, laughing and roughhousing in good humor at the start of the vacation months. It had been long after midnight when the trailers and cars arrived the night before. Everyone was too tired to do more than check the monkey cages before falling in bed. Now they were ready to work. Things had to be done before it got so cold a man’s fingers would seal against the steel equipment.

“Walker’s World of Fun” was late closing this year, and the cold winds already blew over the open pasture, chilling everyone as they oiled up the equipment for winter storage and packed up games and prizes from twenty-five concession booths in big brown boxes that they sealed with thick tape.

Betty had already started pulling teddy bears and toy rabbits from their hanging racks in a concession booth. Gloria joined her. She pulled out boxes and wrapped each animal in white paper or plastic, quickly filling several boxes, then moving on to fill another one.

“What’s Betty muttering about?” Joseph McCoy asked, coming into the booth to help. “With a face like that you’d think the new season had just begun.”

Gloria nodded. “Fireman,” she said.

“Oh, I see.” Joseph grinned.

“It’s going to be a long winter,” Gloria said sadly. She handed him the roll of thick brown tape. “Guess we’re stuck with him the next three months unless Mr. Walker does some rearranging. I’ve begged him to move Fireman, but I’m not expecting much to come of it. He says there’s nowhere to move him this season.”

“Mr. Walker’s on his way down. He’s going to give us a pep talk. I reckon. Seems he’s been mouthing off about the amount of work we ain’t been doing. That would be a good opportunity to talk it out with him. Might be the only chance this year. I heard he and his wife is heading out for Europe. Might be gone the whole winter.”

“If he can afford to go to Europe, he can sure as hell afford to give me and Betty bus money to go to our cousin’s.”

“I’m going to let you fight that battle for yourself.” Joseph nodded toward a vehicle just turning into the drive.

Mr. Walker cut the auto’s engine and sat watching the workers long enough to make them nervous, then pushed open the door and swung his long thin legs out. He walked across the grounds, nodding at the workers. They followed him like children would the Pied Piper.

Satisfied he had their attention, he waved a hand in the air. “Come on. Get together. I got a little announcement, folks.” He was tall and fatherly looking but his temper was the source of many nights of conversation among the workers. His kind, elderly face disguised a rotten soul and dirty mouth. The carnival was his baby. It had made him a wealthy man, and that the employees of it should have had a measure of credit for the success was not something he felt any intention of giving.

“As you know, this season was not a particularly successful one,” he started, moving his small dark eyes over the individual faces as though trying to lay blame. “I’ve come to tell you that we’re going to have a better one next year.” He paused to allow the news to take hold. “Things never before seen in our time, but you’ll all be introduced to them soon enough.” His eyes hesitated on Gloria, then moved to Betty. He nodded at them. “I need you girls to come with me to the house. I’ve got a special job for you. The rest of you can go back to work.”

He turned on his heel and headed back to the car to wait for the chosen ones. Gloria and Betty took their places in the big car. They sat silently as he drove them across the land and into the wide paved drive that led to the big house, which sat plenty of distance from the trailers.

“Let’s go to my office,” Walker said, climbing from the car.

Gloria and Betty followed him around the side of the house to a back door where he produced a key and unlocked it. Flipping on a light and stepping aside, he motioned them to enter.

“Have a seat.” He indicated a green leather couch, and faced them from a big red leather chair situated nearest the warmth of a blazing fire in the hearth. He stared intently into it a few minutes, giving them time to examine the room. It was the finest one they had ever been in with its book-lined walls and rich, thick carpet and draperies. A large shiny desk took precedence over one side of the room, and there were enough brass lamps and fixtures to outfit a store.

"You girls have been with me a long time...from the very beginning," Walker said.

"Twenty years this spring," Betty recalled.

"I need people I can trust," he said softly, turning his eyes on them. "From our past experience together I believe I've made the right decision with you two. I want you to help look after one of my new exhibits. She's a lady who will need careful handling. I'm having a cage built to specifications to house her."

"A cage, sir?" Betty whispered. "What kind of woman that needs a cage?"

Walker opened his mouth, then shut it and turned back to stare in the fire.

"You might remember," he began softly, "when we went through the farmland last summer...an old man..."

Gloria and Betty nodded, remembering more the heat of that day than the old man who came walking across the carnival grounds clutching a basket between his chest and armpit.

"I'm looking for the man," he said to every worker he passed. "Tell him Winston Brewer's got something to show him."

Walker did not doubt the old man had something to show him. No one came around the carnival grounds before it opened who didn't have something to offer him that they felt was worth a goodly sum of money. Walker reckoned he had seen more pig heads stuffed in bottles of dirty creek water, or prematurely hatched snakes whose deformed carcasses resembled nothing less than a magical illusion floating in its world of man-made vinegar, than anyone else on earth. It would be easy to dismiss the old man, but he had a confidence that made Walker hesitate brushing him off.

"I suppose your prize is in the basket? Well, let's see it then." He cleared off a spot on his desk, then sat back in his chair to wait. Brewer didn't take the bait. Instead he put the basket on the floor next to his feet and placed his hands on the desktop, leaning heavily on his arms, bringing his upper torso and face close to Walker's. He was a heavy-set man of considerable age, with an unhealthy yel-

lowed skin tone. His eyes were dark green and shiny with illness. Colorless thin lips were almost lost in the paleness of his face and when he opened them to speak, the absence of teeth was made startlingly apparent.

"It's lots of prizes I got to show you," he said. "Only I couldn't round them all up to bring here. I got one, but you're going to have to come back with me to see the rest."

Walker stared at him "Why don't you show me what you brought first...then we'll see."

Brewer pulled open the basket and extracted a fluffy white ball. He sat it on Walker's desk and stepped back. The white ball, removed from its nest of darkness, gave a jerky little squawk and made a mad dash across the desk to burrow beneath sheaves of paperwork, man-aging only to poke its head from view.

Brewer laughed and pulled the creature back into the light. He cupped it in his palm and offered it to Walker. "She's a little shy of folks. She only hatched a few days back."

Walker brought it close to his face. It was as cute a baby duckling as he had ever seen, pure white and fluffy fat, spunky with perfectly formed webbed feet. Yet it stared back at him from six eyes black as coal, swiveling three separate heads in an effort to focus.

"Hell..." Walker sighed happily. "How much?"

"Depends how many you wanna buy," Brewer whispered.

"How many you got?" Walker asked, incredulous at his luck. "Are they all like this one?"

"Nope. That's the only one I got like her...but..."

Walker lowered the duckling, watching Brewer. His carny-man instinct had picked up on something. "Yeah?"

"If you like *her*, you'll be crazy about my other stuff."

Walker didn't hesitate. "Where do you live? Will I need a truck, car or trailer?"

Winston Brewer's face broke into a wrinkled road map of friendliness.

"You might better bring one of those trailer cages. You wouldn't want nothing to get loose."

The farm was a study in lush vegetation. Set in the middle of a farming state that boasted desert-like barrenness, it appeared to have sprung up through the earth, sprouting an oasis of trees and bush and cypress, streams and a lake and flowering gardens. Walker followed Brewer's old pick-up truck down a perfectly graveled road to a small, tidy farmhouse where a barrage of brightly-hued birds decorated tree branches overhead, and the air was filled with their soothing chatter.

"You've got a mighty pretty place here," Walker observed as he climbed from his truck. "It must have taken you a lifetime to get it in the shape it's in. I commend you on that. It's been my experience to note most poor fools spend their whole time on this earth trying and never achieving a damn thing to be proud of. You and me got a lot in common, Mr. Brewer. I built that carnival up from one show horse and a pony ride to what it is now: the biggest and best traveling show in the USA."

The old man smiled politely, but his eyes were cunning. "Yeah, I know. That's why I waited and brung my business to you. It takes a man of knowledge to understand the value of what his eyes are seeing. I told myself, now George Walker's the one to appreciate Winston Brewer's collection. I can see now I've met you that I was right."

"Let's get down to business, friend," Walker said, reddening at the compliments from this ancient fellow. He was losing control; that was not a good thing when readying to make an offer on some desired object. "What else have you got to sell? Mind you, I don't impress easily." He stuffed his hand deep inside one pocket, felt the hard roll of greenbacks. It put things back in perspective. One thing he hated above all else was parting with his money.

Brewer by-passed the house, taking a well-worn path off to one side of it. He followed it half a mile down along a

dense wall of blackberry brambles and apple trees.

"I'm taking you the long way around so you can see how things are here," Brewer called from over his shoulder. "Plain-out assed-backwards."

It took Walker a stunned moment to realize fat ripe peaches hung from the apple trees, and red strawberries swung on big blackberry brambles.

The path narrowed painfully. Walker had to turn sideways to squeeze through bush thorns pricking his skin and slapping his face. Then the path opened again and the two men pushed into a wide patch of cleared field.

Walker held his breath. Quaint, comfortable little barns had been fashioned into a circle that emptied into a spacious farmyard. The buildings had real glass windows and solid, heavy front doors. Although Walker did not see anything human, the area was as well tended as an expensive retirement retreat.

"Well, what about it, Mr. Walker?" Brewer stood close by. "See anything of interest?"

Walker shook his head in awe. It was as if Noah had emptied his ark in Brewer's utopia...but with a difference. The animals occupying this space were an unknown breed to the human eye. A four-legged rooster with a bright red comb strutted about a large black hen who viewed him warily from one Cyclops eye that filled half her face. A two-headed lamb romped happily about the barnyard, trying unsuccessfully to nip each other's lips. A fully-grown legless cow enjoyed her lunch laying comfortably in the middle of a pile of hay, while a dog-like creature with a cat's head rolled in the dirt, scratching its back and yelping in pleasure.

In one corner of the yard sat a large fenced pen. Walker moved close enough to peer inside, then backed slowly up, shaking his head in bemused wonder as the inhabitant screamed obscenities at him. The top half was a colorful parrot with a long-tailed feline bottom. Walker had interrupted its bath, and, while its feathered top shook and expanded, the

bottom tail jerked back and forth in nervous agitation.

Brewer laughed merrily. "I call her Polly-puss. She's just like a woman, ain't she? She can't stand being messed with when she's just washed her hair." He bent over and slapped at his knee.

"I believe this is the strangest group of things I've ever been privileged to see, Mr. Brewer," Walker said. "And believe me, I've witnessed some mighty weird cross-breeding. Only thing is they've never lived long enough to be of use. Only good to show through glass bottles and such. Mind if I ask how you managed to keep them alive?"

"Oh, I had nothing to do with it, son." Brewer smiled mischievously. "This land was once occupied by Jacob Winston Brewer. You might have heard on him in history books. He was gifted in magic, though some tell a different story about old Jacob. Some claim he was in cahoots with the devil and in punishment the good Lord placed a curse on everything that's born here. He lived over a hundred years ago. I'm named after him. My kin have lived on and worked this land for generations. Trouble is, I'm getting too old and feeble to keep up with things. I got to sell out. Going to move to Florida for a little R&R." He pushed in close to Walker. "I've got it in mind to bed me one of those beach-bunnies I see on television. A man gets mighty lonely here. Town folks are scared to death of this place. Only one woman ever gave me the time of day...and I married her, mostly for the relief a man needs on occasion. It's been rough since she died. Naw, I'm selling out and you're the lucky one to get first dibs on my family."

Walker glanced around the yard. His knowledgeable mind calculated what a show featuring such live oddities would bring in dollars and cents. His hand stopped squeezing the wad of money in his pocket. Sweat broke out on his forehead. What a stroke of luck!

"How much would you be asking?" he asked, careful to control his excitement.

Brewer kept smiling. "That's the best part for your side, Mr. Walker. Come on, let's start back." Brewer turned and

started up the path towards the house. "I aim to make you a deal you can't pass up"

Walker stared at the old man's back as he disappeared into the thicket. He took one more look around the barnyard, then hurried to catch up. He would never say it to Brewer, but Walker planned on owning every one of these misfit creatures at any price. The negotiating was the shrewd carry-man's favorite part of his work. His mouth began to water in anticipation. When they reached the vehicles, Walker again repeated the question.

"How much will you take for the lot of them, Mr. Brewer? I'm prepared to make you a generous offer of..."

"The price of removing them from my property," Brewer whispered, steadying his dark shiny eyes on Walker's astonished ones.

"You're kidding," Walker said.

"That and not a penny more, Mr. Walker. There's only one thing...see, the missus and I had a baby girl. That's what killed my wife, childbirth. It was purely an accident that she bore here, 'cause we didn't plan it that way. The baby came so sudden, we couldn't get off the property. You have to take her, too. Just that and the whole kit and kaboodle is yours...no other strings attached...well, except that I don't never want any of my family back. Do we have a deal, Mr. Walker?"

"A daughter? You want me to take your child?" Walker asked, shocked.

"Oh, she ain't a baby. She's 23 years old now. I got to tell you, Mr. Walker, I'm no good at this daddy business and she'll just be in the way of my getting some pleasure down there in Florida. Besides that," Brewer's grin was full of evil intentions. "that girl is one hot mama. She can't get enough of it, you know what I mean? She could be a real asset to a traveling show. Sometimes I wished she wasn't my own flesh and blood, then I wouldn't have to sell out and go looking for it somewhere else. That's one thing I never would do, you know? No matter what people say about me. Is it a deal, Mr. Walker?"

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"And it was." Walker finished his story. He pulled a plastic-coated photo from his desk and slid it carefully across the desk to Gloria and Betty. "Isn't she remarkable?"

The photo's glossy black and white only accentuated the stark reality of what they were seeing. She was small and naked, her flesh pale and unblemished against a dark background. She had a beautiful body, the kind men often kill to possess, with a face that would have brought any man to his knees. She was perfection except for the one noticeable flaw a camera lens could not disguise: a row of spindly legs that held her inches off the floor, balanced upon the silvery web she had spun between the floor and cellar wall.

"How would we take care of something like that?" Gloria whispered. Her head began to spin. "I wouldn't know how."

"Oh, she doesn't require much. Gloria. But she does like blood with her meals, and that's what you'd be expected to supply for her. Other than that she's quite independent." Walker leaned forward in his chair. "I'll help until you get used to it. I've already secured a blood donor for the first week. All you need do is make sure she gets a bit each day. Besides that, there'll be something extra in it for you...just name it. A little extra cash, perhaps a round-trip first class bus ticket to visit your cousin in Florida for you and Betty? Anything."

"Our trailer to ourselves." Betty whispered, avoiding his eyes. What choice did she have? "I want you to move Fireman out. He's an awful man and we shouldn't have to put up with his antics. That's it, then. I don't want to ever have to deal with him again."

There reigned a full minute of silence, and when they looked at Mr. Walker's face he wore an expression they would never forget. A look that said it all: they had once again sold themselves short. A look of extreme relief to have gotten something needed so easily. Walker reached across the space between them and stroked her arm gently.

"That's already taken care of, my dear. It's agreed upon, then. I'm afraid you

will have to deal with him a while longer...but it shouldn't be more than a week."

Betty and Gloria looked at each other in icy realization.

Across the open field, in the back room of trailer number 7, a muffled sound echoed through the cold air.

knock...knocky-knocky...knock
said the wall. ❖

COLORS THAT ARE PEELING AWAY

by Lyn Lifshin

Arms and legs grow
under the sound but
love is pulling away
from their bodies,
something cuts across
everything they can
ever know. As if to
suck the dark out of
his hands her breasts
fall into new orbits,
nipples stretching
higher than leaves or
mountains, new avalanches
unfolding in her thighs.
But the sand still pushes
into their foreheads, colors
peel off everything they try to
hold. All their rooms keep breaking.
A city of leaves
starts to grow inside her muscles
but when she tries to reach him
the leaves turn into old photographs
and she is running in them
falling, smaller, dissolving
somewhere along the lost grass of
a super four lane highway through his heart

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LETTERS FROM BEYOND

Barbara Rosen
25 Parade Place
Brooklyn NY 11226

Whoa!

I'd about given up on ever getting another copy of *S&T* -- and then, lo! In my mailbox appeared this slick, handsome publication. The grub has emerged from its long stay underground and become a red-eyed, gauzy-winged cicada. Bravo!

What you're printing has changed, too. Several of the stories ("Welcome to Merland," "Restoring Order," "The Baobab Tree," "Paradise Lost") convincingly changed the angle from which most of us look at our world. And "Ashes to Bones, All Fall Down" has a lovely feel to it. The matter-of-fact acceptance of a sort of contagious family madness and the way the children manage to get through it and come out on the other side had enormous appeal (can you imagine them being separated and put into foster homes, never having a chance to heal each other?). I also like "A Light for the Abyss" because (surprise!) the god of the aliens turned out to be *real*. Not your usual SF religion-bashing -- and ultimately quite moving.

The other stories didn't quite make it for me. The senility in "Yesterday and Today" was -- well, I've known some people who became senile, and that's not how they were. The point of the story, that mind is what counts, could have been made in several more effective ways. "It's Steady Work" was very well-written and I liked the details about the craftsmanship. But why was the victim (of only *one* of the bad guys) there? And what was going to happen when the house was finally fixed up? And how come everybody ate and slept if everybody was dead? Stuff like that *bothers* me. As for "Chushingura Cafe," it was just a long

windup to a punchline. Cute, but...hell, if I want cute I'll get *Reader's Digest*.

Scott Brents
2716 Greenhill Drive
Mesquite TX 75150

I recently subscribed to *Space and Time* and asked Gordon to send me a back issue of #86, along with the current #87. Comparing the two, I think the larger format is more attractive and marketable.

Occasionally, I read stories that I not only like, but wish I myself had written. "It's Steady Work" is such a story. If you have the opportunity, please pass my compliments on to Mr. Walther, for a well written (and ending) story.

Kendall Evans
6012 Freckles Road
Lakewood CA 90713

Some very good poems in your issue #87 of *Space & Time*. I especially liked "Scavenging Destiny" by Susan Spilecki.

Stephen Kent
10518 Catterskill Court
Columbia MD 21044

The area bookstores in my neck of the woods do not stock their shelves with many small press publications, so I had very little working knowledge of their average quality of writing, artwork, layout, etc. The only small press mag I had read recently was an issue of *Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine*, and I must say I was thoroughly unimpressed with the writing. The stories struck me as rather juvenile themes presented in trite prose. This then had [see page 45]



**"...REDEEM MY SOUL FROM
THE POWER OF THE GRAVE..."**
 by A.R. Morlan and James B. Johnson
 illustrated by Glenn Chadbourne

"But God will redeem my soul from the power of the grave, for He shall redeem me. Se'lah."

Psalms 49.15

"Hey, Joe."

Didn't see nobody, but the voice scared the hell out of me, me being half in and half out of the grave and all, and not half drunk -- yet.

"Mit-ter, you sec-son, please?"

A kid's voice, behind me. Something to interrupt my lunch, gimme a break -- "Joe?"

I turned, stretched and looked. "Oh-oh." I scrambled up, careful not to drop my thermos, even though Paul Harvey says you can drop it from a ten story building.

"Uh-oh." The kid waved a shovel at me. I didn't know what the hell to think.

"Joe, you --" His shovel looked menacing.

I snatched up my own shovel for protection. He was grown but had a kid's face. Boss Sleasar would've called him a "Gook," but strictly speaking he was one of them Hmongs we got up here in Wisconsin.

He came toward me. I brandished my shovel like Robin Hood staving off Little John. "My name ain't 'Joe,' it's Pendleton, and they call me 'Pinebox.'"

His face scrunched up. I remembered reading one of his kind had given his social worker a single bullet as a warning, when word around the state was that all them Hmongs' welfare might get reduced. On account of all of them thinking the promises Tricky Dick made to them after the war, about them being taken care of forever, were as binding as anything *else* Nixon ever promised. But he faltered now that he was up close and had to crane his neck to look up at me. I was tall even for an American, at close to six foot, and he was short for an Asian, less than five foot even. He waved his hand, pointing toward another section of the skull orchard -- *cemetery*, rather. Sleasar don't like anything sounding inappropriate -- to the public, that is.

"You sec-son?"

"Yeah, I'm the sexton, but I do damn

near everything here and they still call me a gravedigger."

His shovel hand wilted; I didn't feel so threatened. I leaned on my own shovel and followed his gaze to the grave I'd just squared off. This boneyard has a backhoe I can make sing, but no machine -- even if Boss Sleasar wasn't too cheap to buy it -- can square off a fresh-dug grave so's the next-of-kin don't complain and one of them concrete vaults fit just right. You gotta do it the old fashioned way, from the bottom with a sharp shovel, scraping and edging. It's a talent like sculpting, but don't pay as good.

"You did that, Joe? Someone *in* there?"

Southeast Asians must take a course in calling Americans "Joe." When I was in Thailand at the request of Uncle Sam, if they didn't know you, they used "Joe."

"Not yet, unless the spirit's out here checking on its next place of residence."

He just gazed into the excavation.

Too bad they ban just horses and dogs out here. "Fella, I don't need no help -- well, I could use some, but Sleasar's too cheap to hire someone else."

The guy wasn't very big, but he was over thirty, easy, now that he stood up close, not so much like a high school kid. Them Hmong look like that sometimes -- though I seen a couple taller'n me over there -- especially the ones who tool around in nice new subcompacts or custom vans the church sponsors and welfare folks help 'em get. How the hell *do* they pass the driver's license test? Most can't speak American worth diddly, and this one wasn't all that articulate. But he dressed proper, no tank top and thongs and baggy shorts like most of 'em wear in summer. He wore chinos and a short sleeve shirt buttoned to the neck like a nerd. He sweated so hard his face looked like a beach ball just out of the pool, all flatly round and smooth and yellow-like under a tan. The natives I'd known in Asia were so white you'd think they couldn't color up. Hmong I guess are different. Not to mention shorter.

He dropped his shovel and dug into his pocket, pulling out a torn scrap of paper -- not a bullet, thank God. On the back were classified ads, so I knew it was an

obit. "Death notice" sounds so bureaucratic. Boss Sleasar calls 'em "Stiffy Stats." The **HUNTERSTOWN WEEKLY** runs them back of the classifieds.

The Hmong cocked his head, hard brown eyes bright and unblinking, like them pheasants that trotted around the cemetery years ago, afore the Boss brought in foxes to kill them and run the rabbits and gophers and snakes off to keep 'em from messing up graves. Folks don't like to see a trail of rabbit rounds across Aunt Edna's final resting spot.

"You sec-son, I need dig up this lady." He waved the clipping at me.

"Oh, shit." The name on the obit was familiar, and the face more so.

"Weasel-Face," we called her. "Mrs. Sleasar" to her face. Ole Marie Sleasar, mother of Boss Andy. Me and damn near everybody else in town had had Old Weasel-Face for art class. "Chew gum and you'll wear it on your nose," was her favorite saying. You'd think somebody with such a pinched ferret face would try acting different than she looked, but not her. Hair never even changed style from when it was frizzy thinning blonde, then gray. Maybe it was a wig. If she didn't like what art you done, she pouted like eggs in vinegar. I remembered her as a skinny old bat with pastel chalk in one hand and a drippy paint brush in the other, and *always* envisioned her with a T-square up her flat butt. She'd make red ink checks on pictures she didn't think "*artistic*" enough, *lategoddamn*ya.

Old Weasel-Face had retired a few years back, just before the Hmong started settling here in Dean County. Wisconsin has the third largest Hmong population in the country; they like the smaller communities where nobody pushes their life and culture and all that radio talk show crap off on everybody else.

"Stop waving that in my face." I snatched the clipping from him. He acted like I'd insulted *his* mother; then I seen it. The guy was *hurting*. Weasel-Face's parting hadn't bothered me; I'd put red check marks all over the *inside* of her vault cover. One for every wad of gum I'd worn, and one for every check she gave *me*. But paybacks aren't always fun.

I shook my head. "Yeah, I'm the sexton. Who the hell are you?"

"Xiong, Neng Xiong." He tried to say it like an Oriental version of "Bond, James Bond," but his voice couldn't pull it off. The sorrow in him etched into the words. His surname was common here, the Hmong answer to Smith.

"Not only am I the sexton --" I liked that word, rolled it around in my mouth -- but I dig the graves, serve as custodian, watch the place come night. Whatever Boss Sleasar decides I should do." I didn't care if he only caught one word in ten. Least he didn't nod and *nod* like many of 'em do.

"You sexxon, Joe?"

"Pinebox. And I said I was."

"Nevermind no permit from State Health Board, okay? I give you money." He stabbed two fingers at Weasel-Face's obit in my hand.

I shook my head violently. "Hold yer horses, Mr. Xiong. No permission, no digging, no disinternment. Only the city can do that in 'cordance with the State Board of Health. And a licensed embalmer's gotta supervise. Cemetery regs, pages eight and nine. I know my stuff."

The fella tried to say something but could only manage a fish-like gape. He pointed to the last part of the clipping.

I read it aloud. "After her retirement, Mrs. Sleasar volunteered at Hunterstown Day Care. Buried with her was the last art project she and her students worked on, mosaic tile and popsicle stick picture frames, each featuring the photo of one of her day care students --"

The guy could tell by my face I didn't understand the problem; when some old bat's son happens to be *Mr.* Hunterstown, as in owning, overseeing, or sticking his finger into every pie, his mother's stiffy stats include every last thing she'd done in eighty-some years. Xiong maybe hadn't read the **WEEKLY** long enough to realize *any* announcement about any Sleasar would be wordier than *Moby Dick* and five times as boring.

"...get sick, *die*...only *four*, Joe... Pinebox, you *gotsa* help."

I kicked sandy soil -- best for digging. I hate the clay stuff. "Who's sick?"

He gave me one of them foreigner "Don't your kind know *anything*?" looks.

His mouth worked, then he calmed himself and took a deep breath. "You take picture someone, you take soul. In picture, samesame soul, samesame person. Picture with dead lady." He pointed at the freshly dug grave, then to the other section of the cemetery. "Samesame soul *with* dead lady. Soul go with dead lady, go land of dead, soul no more with live person of picture." He gulped. "Soul no more in body, body get sick, body die. Bad, bad thing in our religion. Dead lady steal soul --"

"Oh shit." I said intelligently. "Whose soul did Weasel-Face steal?"

"My son. *Can* you open grave? Save him soul?"

"Oh *shit*." I needed a drink.

His voice and looks told me he was at the end of his rope. Not to mention the shovel. He'd been through this song and dance for plenty of local petty bureaucrats. His being here shovel in hand told me this was his last chance.

I shook my head. "No can do, buddy."

His face died.

"Lissen. You know what it'd take? Her body's been dead a while, though it's in a vault. It won't smell too good in there." Not necessarily true, but he didn't need to know that. "You'd have to dig up the grass in flats to replace it after. Then the backhoe and make sure you don't crack the vault. Then unseal the cement vault. *Then* unscrew or unsnap the coffin, I forget which she had right now."

He looked like he'd been gut-shot.

"You got to get permission. Hell, I'd get fired first and maybe do some hard time. It'd be grave-robbing."

Some former Hmong tribesmen did animal sacrifices and weird stuff with eggs and incense, you read about it sometimes, along with getting caught killing deer out of season. They've strange ways, and a real different religion, but hell I don't hold it against them. If they really *believed* in soul-robbing or whatever they call it --

"This just your son? How about them other kids in the class?"

He looked up at me. "Maybe some 'Melican child. I don't think? But other Hmong, nosir. His glue not enough yet dry, Mrs. Sleasar she say my son. Nkajo no take picture home."

"Dear sweet Jesus." Just because the belief wasn't mine didn't mean it wasn't a *belief*. But how many little kids dry up and die from losing their souls? I shook my head. "Friggin' ridiculous. I don't care what you say --"

"Mr. Sleasar, I talk to him." Xiong shuddered. "He laugh."

"Yeah. He swerves his Towncar to run over puppies." He only done that two or three times, just to enhance his reputation. I'd call him a slum landlord, but Hunterstown has none. He *does* own and milk some very low income housing, though.

Speaking of the devil, his big black Lincoln slewed to a stop on the nearby lane. The automatic window went down like a guillotine getting prepped. Sleasar stuck his greying head out. "Pendleton. Meet me in the office. Now."

I could almost feel the air conditioning blast all the way over where I was. The window rose silently. The Towncar started up, stopped, jerked into reverse, backed to its previous position. The window ran down again.

"You got help?" Boss Sleasar's wrinkled neck stretched out like an ostrich's. "I authorized no hiring." He seemed to see Xiong for the first time. "And I won't have any goddamn welfare-suckin', food-stamp cheatin', lily-livered, heathen *gooks* working for me. Tell him he's fired." The window zipped back up and the rear tires bit on the gravel and dug a parallel furrow I'd have to level out.

Ol' Xiong was open-mouthed. "He no remember me."

"You probly all look alike to him."

"It is his mother," Xiong spoke each word carefully, "who have picture."

"I doubt she knows it. Like mother, like son." To Marie Sleasar's credit, she did volunteer time and artistic 'talent' to that day care center. One day I'll find one good thing to say about the Boss. "I need a drink." I retrieved my thermos, opened it, and drank straight. Grapefruit juice

has a way of invigorating you. And vodka is a good eye-opener in the middle of a warm day. Or a cold day five feet down digging into tundra or whatever happens to the ground in winter hereabouts.

"He no remember *me*," Xiong repeated, with a hint of surprise -- or hope.

"He doesn't remember nobody unimportant." I gulped again. Fortunately, vodka doesn't smell. "I got to go. I'll tell Sleasar you was lookin' for mushrooms or a lost dog --"

"Lost soul, Mr. Pinebox, Nkajo lost soul." He glared at me accusingly.

I didn't mean to insult him. "Lissen, Xiong. I don't got any other job prospects. Sleasar, he'll blackball me...."

"No help?"

"I can't." This was terribly awkward. I had nothing against Cambodians and their furrin' ways. I didn't even consider them heathens. If they was, I was.

His spade slipped from his hand and his shoulders fell like an avalanche.

"Lissen, I ain't updated my resume lately." My voice was lame. "I need the goddamn job, see?"

He just stared at me, resignation on his face. "Dollars?"

"Shoot, you don't got any more money than I do. And you don't look like an old geezer at the end of his string, either." Me over fifty, and not a damn thing to show for it.

"You not help?"

"I been saying that, see? You *don't* dig up the Boss' damn mother from her grave. Tends to ruin your seniority and employment future."

"My boy, he will die."

"I got a dead goddamn kid myself, understand? Dead, dead, goddamn *dead*. So I don't give a shit. I work here all goddamn day and all goddamn night and it pays enough to stay shitfaced half the goddamn day and all goddamn night. I ain't diggin' up no fuckin' dead art teachers illegally, not even Weasel-Face Sleasar. Look, go your way, okay? They'll hang your ass. Hell, they'll ship it back to Cambodia quicker'n a bunny.

They'll deport you for eatin' dogs and sacrificin' oxen. Unnerstand 'deport'?"

I know them guys from Asia. The Chinese and the Japs are the worst. but they all worry about their image. They try not to show emotions in public.

I think Xiong just died inside.

My own thoughts and feelings churned like a tornado through Kansas.

"Go on home." I shooed him off. Christ, I felt rotten. I drank the rest of the thermos and watched Xiong walk toward the trees and the fence beyond like he was going to his own hanging.

I trudged across the graveyard, taking a shortcut. Why couldn't Boss Sleasar just talk to me there? Or why couldn't he have given me a ride?

I remembered getting a ride from a Lao one time. A Lao or a Hmong; didn't make no nevermind to me then. Or now, for that matter. I'd took a train from up-country to Hua Lampung, the giant railway station in Bangkok. Outside Hua Lampung, I was gonna hop a bus for Sukumvit Road when this albino-colored Lao offered me a ride in his old Volkswagen bus. "Hell, I don't care." I told him. "save me two and a half *baht* bus fare." I was half plastered on Singha beer from the long train ride.

The guy quizzed me a lot, asking about my job and all. Half the Laos were CIA. Maybe he was testing me. I didn't tell him nothing important. Hell, I was a staff sergeant at Takhli Air Force base upcountry. I worked in the motor pool, mostly on Ford Econolines and pickups and Metro vans. But also at Takhli was a fenced-in area with an Air America station, which was a CIA air station supporting operations in Laos. I seen this Mel Gibson movie about Air America and all them Laos were talking Thai. I didn't understand that. Maybe then Laos talked Thai to Americans.

Anyway, this old boy, he gimme a ride to Soi si-sip-jet, soi 47, and I hopped out and went down the soi and never seen him again. My *tilok*, my pregnant almost-wife-girlfriend, was there at her family's home to give birth to our son.

She did and she died. Then he died. I stayed drunk thereafter and Uncle Sam shipped me back to the land of the big PX and I didn't sober up and they gave me a medical discharge, like a lot of other vets. In Wisconsin, drunks aren't paid much nevermind, even vets.

Viciously, I kicked an old wooden cross. It didn't crack, just sorta fell apart. "Shit." Looking around quickly, I saw no one. I noted the location, pulled the rest of the cross up and took the remains with me. I dumped the wood in the maintenance shed and headed for the office, going in the back to avoid the showroom and salesmen -- make that "funeral directors."

In Sleasar's office were the freshest of flowers -- I mean "floral tributes" -- delivered lately. It smelled sickeningly sweet. The receptionist, who was also Sleasar's secretary, smiled hollowly and pointed to the door. "He's waiting, Pine."

"What he wants, Coreen?"

She avoided my eyes. "God only knows."

She knew. When Sleasar complains, it's loud.

I knocked and went in. I know some about wood. He had it all, especially mahogany. Damn room looked like the inside of a giant coffin. Except he had plenty of pictures of himself all over the wall. Photos of him with congressmen, one senator, the last governor, and Wayne Newton, from his trip to Vegas.

He sat behind his desk, an overwhelming affair with enough curlicues to look like a miniature feudal castle.

I glanced at my hands. "Mrs. Stephen's cross fell down. I got to put another up."

He shrugged. "Have Coreen send them a bill."

"Yessir. You wanted to see me?"

He shot me a look under grey bushy brows that reminded me of his mother's hair. "In a minute. You payin' gooks to help you out, Pendleton?"

"Nossir."

He snorted. "Better not. Goddamn trouble's all they are. Get this, get that from welfare and the church folks, and they won't get their butts in a church to save their yellow hides. Complain about

what they got, that they can do, but to behave like normal Christians... nothing but problems with their kind, Pendleton, nothing but trouble." The Boss gave a short snorting laugh. Xiong's words came back to me...and a little guilt.

The Boss *had* done that to Xiong's kid. On purpose. No way to better get even with someone, no matter how small the slight, than to dangle them by their own rope.

He added. "You never spend your money, I figure you got tired of digging."

"Nossir."

He shrugged. "If you say so. Pendleton, I've been watching you lately. You're drinking on the job again, are you not?"

"Nossir." The bastard.

"We went through this before. I thought we had it all straight." *Double* bastard.

"Yessir."

"You promised me on pain of losing your job."

"Yessir."

I stared at a photo of him off Florida with a giant tarpon. The dead fish was more attractive.

"And you claim you no longer drink alcohol during working hours?"

"Yessir."

"Yet...you still drink?"

"Upon occasion."

"You work days in upkeep and graves and nights as a watchman here, no?"

"Yessir."

"You never take time off?"

"I got nothing else to do."

"If you never take time off, when do you drink?"

"I --"

"You're always on duty."

I shrugged. No way would I come out ahead. He was in one of his moods. It happened a couple times a year, though not since his mother died over a month ago. I'd hoped for a change in him. I'd seen real tears in his eyes at the funeral.

Now that he'd put me in my place, he'd get down to what he really wanted. "I want Mother's marker cleaned, Pendleton, on a more frequent basis. And fresh flowers every day. The woman was a saint, and deserves them."

I knew he knew I knew where he wanted me to get the flowers; the best ones. too.

"Yessir."

"All right. get on with it." He wagged a finger at me. "And I caution you about drinking on the job -- while you still have one."

"Yessir."

I left before he could think of anything else. Coreen gave me a not-so-reassuring smile. I went out the front, not caring about exposing prospective customers to my 'rough-hewn' appearance. You don't dig up earth for a living without gettin' some on your person. Funny how the Boss was worried about how I'd look to his customers; he only hired the burned-out vet to show what a goody-goody he was. I suspect the Boss was experiencing a sharp drop in his sense of civic vanity when it came to me.

Working for a man like the Boss almost made getting fired worth it.

In the maintenance building I unlocked the paint locker, dug out a bottle of vodka, upended it happily for a moment, screwed the cap back on and locked the doors.

I built Mrs. Stephen a new cross, painted it up nice and white, and went to install it. No need to bother her next-of-kin. Sleasar could afford my time and some lumber and paint. Mrs. Stephen had been elderly; it didn't bother me none to plant her in the skull orchard. It's the kids, you know? Vulnerable, innocent kids who hadn't yet grown into adults who understood life enough to face death. Maybe 'cause their future's snuffed. Us'n who got no future hurt worse when a kid's is gone. There's something about mothers and fathers whose child dies as opposed to sons and daughters whose elderly parent dies. In Thailand, they live to die. Manner of death and after-death are extremely important to them. Guys who served in Nam claim it was like that there, too. The good ole Mystic Far East. I hoped my kid and my *tilok* had wonderful afterlives.

I took the vodka and talked it out to Mrs. Stephen, but she wasn't much help.

I was putting the tools up in the maintenance building when everybody left for the day. Nothing was scheduled, services or what have you, so everyone was gone by five. Sleasar had left earlier, to check on his other businesses.

With a good buzz on, I had my old pickup deliver me to the spread of duplexes Sleasar had part interest in. Curiosity overwhelmed me. The Xiong clan was outside one peeling-paint 'plex. Neng and his woman and their older kids. Nkajo looked like somebody far away was slowly strangling a voodoo doll that looked like him. Poor little fucker believed what they told him about his soul. Did he even know he had a soul? Why try to convince a four year old he's gonna die because somebody took his soul to their grave?

I went away and got drunker.

I came back to see Nkajo again. Would my son have believed this shit? It was ten that night and I remembered little of the getting drunk part. But I remembered the vacant eyes of little Nkajo. And the resigned eyes of his mother and father. And the frightened eyes of the other Hmong kids. All of 'em just sitting on the concrete porch, not playing, not laughing, not like kids at all. Heathen. 'gooks' or *whathaveyou*, that ain't right.

"Shit!" I told the whole kit and caboodle or passel or whatever groups Hmongs come in. "We'll need help. Can't run the backhoe at night, somebody'll notice."

Down deep, I didn't want to see Weasel-Face again, not alive, certainly not dead. Never mind what her son might do to me.

"Let us go 'fore I sober up and change my mind." I told Xiong.

It was nigh onto midnight and I was darn near sober and scared and I think the term is 'illegal exhumation,' aka 'graverobbing.'

There were four of us, me and Xiong and two others, maybe relatives, named Yang and Ying or some damn thing. Nobody saw them in the bed of my pickup truck.

Here we were, shovels and picks in hand, the way we used to do it before

backhoes and front-end loaders, four guys with hand tools, reminding me of being 'closer my God to Thee.' In those days, the stone orchard was a wilder place, with animals darting about even in the daytime. Xiong's buddies had brought a small cage with something inside. I didn't want to think about what it was -- or what they were fixing to do with it. I'd read about their ceremonies.

The lantern hissed. I'd like to say the night was pitch black with storm clouds looming and shards of lightning, but the moon was three-quarters and high. A bit of wind, chilly for summer. The lantern still hissed, and a fox scurried, eyes big and glowing.

The Hmong wanted to hop right to it.

"Hold." I said. "We gotta do this so nobody knows nothin' about it, unnerstand?"

They nodded in concert, indicating my enormous wisdom -- or, more likely, just putting up with me to get the job done.

We could've cut the sod into flats two feet square, but Boss Sleasar would've noticed, so we curred and rolled the entire section and pushed it aside. It looked like a mammoth moldy mossy chocolate jelly roll.

To maintain what the regs call the 'visual integrity of the grave site,' I laid out tarps and plastic ground sheets to hold the dirt. Then we dug.

Graves are thought of as six feet deep. Well, sometimes. Suppose it's February and the wind is coming from the Arctic and Canada doesn't have the common courtesy to intercept it and the ground is hard as granite and the snow is deep -- well, anyway, you figger, then you stick in a concrete vault that's big enough to hold a coffin -- casket -- and you put a concrete lid on the vault and presto, we only hadda dig down three or four feet.

We struggled to get the vault lid off and propped it on the side of the excavation. A crowbar broke the sealant and pried it up.

Opening the coffin was tricky. Usually you've exhumed the damn thing legally and raised it out of the vault and set it on the ground outside. But Marie Sleasar's vault was the large economy size, big

enough for two coffins. "Nothing's too good for Mother," Boss said.

I had a couple belts to jack up my courage and we slid the coffin aside to make more access to the locks on one side. In a New York minute I had the coffin ready to open...then just crouched there in the wavering light of the lantern.

"Pinebox, do it!" Xiong dropped beside me.

I stared at the red check marks I'd painted on the underside of the vault lid. I was having second and fifth thoughts. I'm not superstitious, but *I* know you don't screw around with the dead. Anyone who's been to the East knows it -- it's different there. Some of that can't help but rub off on a man. Words like *Ma Qui* and all the chanting and incense and such. To them, it has *meaning*.

Xiong shoved me aside, stooped a bit, and lifted the top of the coffin.

I held my breath.

Three Hmong breathed out with relief.

Finally, I exhaled. The art teacher lay as she had at her funeral. There was a momentary sickening sweetness, 'fore the wind scooped it out of the grave and scattered it. The mortician removes all bodily fluids from several points and replaces them with formaldehyde or similar preservatives.

Her face looked like fine spider webbing, or maybe millions of wrinkles overlapping. She remained as hard in death as she was in life, like a road-killed ferret on the day of the first hard frost. Her dark Sunday dress looked like spilled ink in the coffin.

Ying or Yang shone a flashlight on her face. The beam traveled to her shoulder, then down her torso, and stopped.

"I'll be damned." I didn't whisper any longer.

There in her slightly clawed hand was Nkajo's picture.

"Get picture, Pinebox." Xiong hissed.

"Like hell. This is as far as I'm going." One picture only, thank God.

Xiong tentatively reached down and grasped a corner of the picture. He tugged but it didn't come. He tugged harder. I wondered if Weasel-Face's fin-

gers or entire hand would come off, permanently attached to the tiled frame.

Xiong made an exclamation and pried her fingers off and the picture sorta leapt from Marie Sleasar to Neng Xiong.

Xiong stepped back and caressed the object like it was Nkajo himself..

I scrambled out and grabbed another of what Made Milwaukee Famous, intent on getting my buzz back.

Xiong climbed out and joined Ying and Yang, covered cage in hand, off to the side near some bushes, taking the lantern.

It was a chill wind for mid-summer.

Ying/Yang produced some eggs and incense and began a ceremony I didn't want to know about. I popped another beer, the last one gone fast.

I looked at the unguarded grave. The wind was dead now. Something riveted my eyes, maybe my other senses. Something intangible...a wisp like a baby's breath on a cold winter morn, or the last spiraling drizzle from a stubbed-out Camel, *somegoddamnthing*, eked from the lip of the excavation. Wavered in place a second, as if honing in on something, then snaked along after Xiong like the last gossamer vestiges of a jet's contrail at 35,000 feet. Only...no contrail sorta *skips*, like a kid who's playing and happy, not all sad and choked with invisible fingers on some duplex porch. The wisp wasn't big, but it wasn't small...just like Nkajo. *Whatever* it was, it dispersed when it reached the three squatting Hmong, wavering, then merging with the faint billows of incense.

Somebody walked over *my* grave. "Jesus." I tossed the empty alongside Weasel-Face's coffin. "Be right back." Ying, Yang and Xiong, chanting, did not hear me.

I hopped in my pickup and drove to the rear of the main building where they deliver the corpses -- 'dearly departed' -- and the coffins. 'Caskets.' Using my master key, I went to Andy Sleasar's office, and took it right off the wall, nail and all. He'd notice it was gone, but what explanation could he come up with? *Christians* didn't have the same worries 'heathens' did. I insured I hadn't dropped

any dirt along the corridor before locking up and returning to the gravesite.

The Hmong squatted and chanted, barely glancing at me. I took another beer down with me, feeling better all the time.

Weasel-Face hadn't moved. The nine by twelve professional photograph of Boss Sleasar and his tarpon glinted in the distant lantern light. I didn't want to touch her, but I curled her brittle fingers around the photo. Then I stood back and looked. Momma and her finest artistic expression. I drained my beer and dropped it next to the other empties. I almost put it in the coffin. Wondering about insubstantial wisps, I looked around uncomfortably. The fish was already dearly departed, but maybe she'd take the spirit of dead fish smell with her. Maybe the road-kill puppies would find her and her sonny-boy.

I slammed the coffin lid closed, locked it, centered it in the vault kicking beer cans aside, applied sealant to the top of the vault, tilted the vault lid back over it and let it drop. It took a few moments to align it, and paste more sealant around the edges.

For the first time that night, I breathed easy. Once the jelly-roll of earth and grass was back in place, and I mowed the grounds come morning, even Boss Sleasar wouldn't know what was what. Oh, there'd be plenty of bitching and hollering about the missing picture. Maybe he'd finally make good on his promise to fire me. Hell, the VA must be good for something 'sides sending me junkmail. I'd like to see the Boss get someone to do my job for what he don't pay me, let alone what he won't part with for a new guy. I climbed onto the vault and stepped out of the excavation and began shovelful by shovelful to hide Ol' Weasel-Face's final resting spot.

'Least she won't be so lonely down there no more.

Her loving son would never ask nobody, least of all the sexton, to dig up his Momma.

Not that I'd give permission, regs be-ing regs. ❖

FULL CIRCLE

by Charlee Jacob

Kneeling on the earth,
at syzygial opposites with myself
as spinster gardener and heroine alter-ego,
it is an existence of compromises:
memes and ice creams,
as ridiculous as a single-celled life form with ambition.
I have climbed down painfully from my wheelchair
to work in the garden,
to handle the warm soil that laments the loss of nothing.
There is a stack of old Time Magazines,
art journals and archeological digests
that I slowly tear pages from
with which to wrap the tender seedlings.

Let me be born again as Hurricane Donna
with the digitalized cyclones in Lorenz's weather computer;
on Victor Frankenstein's abattoir table
(The creature really was a personification of Mary Shelley,
a thoughtful freak in a society that tormented
both difference and genius when recklessly combined);
through Francis Farmer's lobotomy
to release all my black butterflies.
Who am I this time, described in flat portraits?
Perhaps a simple, lucid smile from a mystery madonna
or from Leonardo's secret female self?
Maybe a Gauguin primitive with cat eyes
anonymous among the bather's parade of sarongs?
Or a doomed blonde of quixotically childlike lust
battling to keep her skirts down in jets of steam?

One slips in, slips out of them,
sharing moments of their selves in still life,
not in their bodies long enough
to run the gamut of complex emotions
that pinch the thalamus between creator's finger and thumb.
Long enough to sense a momentary confusion
with the unfairness of time,
an impatience with imperfect seasons of rain and comets,
hidden tears helplessness, occasional unrestricted joy.
It isn't really a transmigration of souls
where I trade places with the body's rightful occupant;
That Would Be Stealing.

What if unicorn and virgin could share
the same space for a fraction of an instant?
What if Guinevere met her own white-faced helix

and they bonded as spiral and doppelganger
 to create the DNA of all camelots to follow,
 triumph and tragedy programmed into gated genes,
 the doomed chromosomes of queens?
 (I tasted an adulterer's musk for pico-seconds.
 Poets misspoke the arrangement.
 Geoffrey of Monmouth told the truth.
 Guinevere slept and plotted with Mordred, not Lancelot.)

I am not responsible for Arthur's heartbreak,
 brevity exculpates me from history's sins.
 These are loose minutes,
 there are mossings on the mind, a confusion
 with identity that only moves backward
 like some loose cannon Merlin but in Morgan le Fay's gender.
 Only into female personas, whose consummate archetypes
 have been captured on film or canvas
 or any other medium that plunders the likeness at standstill.
 Tossed back and connected, trying to pluck a few clues
 as to who I have been reborn as in this specious interlude,
 manifold spirits intersecting malleable matter.

Who was the first, the nearest in years
 in this spontaneous sequential drift?
 Jackie Kennedy bent over a husband,
 a president just shot/black and white grain.
 I smelled iron and copper, lead and slowly melting gold.
 Heard shrieks as an incandescent kingdom
 was suddenly fed to the worms.
 Then just as quickly I was back on my useless legs,
 staring at the heliotropes I had planted
 because I appreciated how they always
 turned their faces to follow the sun.

I traveled fertility-waif Marilyn Monroe
 and the sainted Eleanor Roosevelt,
 was Eva Braun beguiled by a beast
 with Fingerspitzengefuhl, the fingertip touch.
 Was Marie Curie appalled by her own crumbling bones,
 radium-flashburned onto the cells, brittle, old.
 Was Mary Todd Lincoln in a madhouse,
 black and gray harbinger taffeta,
 murmuring the name of another assassination,
 twisting in curtains sewn from tens of thousands
 of bloody Civil War uniforms
 until these become extensions of her limbs.

Who will I be next in the maelstroms of women,
 in intermissions of flesh, perfume, and hindsight?

In mous of calculation, courage, and prophecy?
 Vanishing points of Bronte sisters.
 Catherine the Great in a gulag of splendor
 entranced while riding into conflict
 as she feels the heartbeat of her horse through the saddle.
 Down, past, submerging to weep or waltz,
 or bear children from a grimoire womb
 like the spores of flowers destined to be trampled,
 like stars...

I come back to myself shattered.
 I wake full of the silver moon.
 I open my eyes and discover my sore breasts
 leaking a strange milk
 and my crippled thighs dribbling
 the sperm of ancient kings.
 Theodora in purple skirts is two dimensional,
 a sublime ignorance of perspective in the tesseract
 that make up the minutiae of her Byzantine mosaic.
 (Remembering when she was but an actress
 debauched on goldenrod wine but thaumaturgic with a voice,
 a gesture, a will to catch the eye of Justinian.)
 Messalina fondling slaves of both sexes on long nights,
 counting pearls and lovers in strings
 from a treasure box that is bottomless to infinity,
 keeping the narcotic of her teardrops in a vial
 for when she is alone -- making sure she is never alone.

When I woke from this one I hugged each of my dolls
 from a collection of rags, woodens and porcelains.
 Kept because I cannot have children of my own
 but I love their innocent faces so.
 I kiss the pictures of men who never married me.
 I try to feel the dirt on my bare feet
 from the garden that is mine.

What if Helen had recombined with the stones of Troy?
 Would she have dreamed of their fall in parable with her own?
 Of their bondage in the earth that buried them for millennia?
 Would she have understood herself as a key
 in the heredity of all prizes to be won and reclaimed,
 without volition but plenty of complex pattern?
 Closed creatrixes, moonlight in the enzymes,
 placenta in the mortar of pyramids
 and in the paint used to redden the lips on sarcophagi.

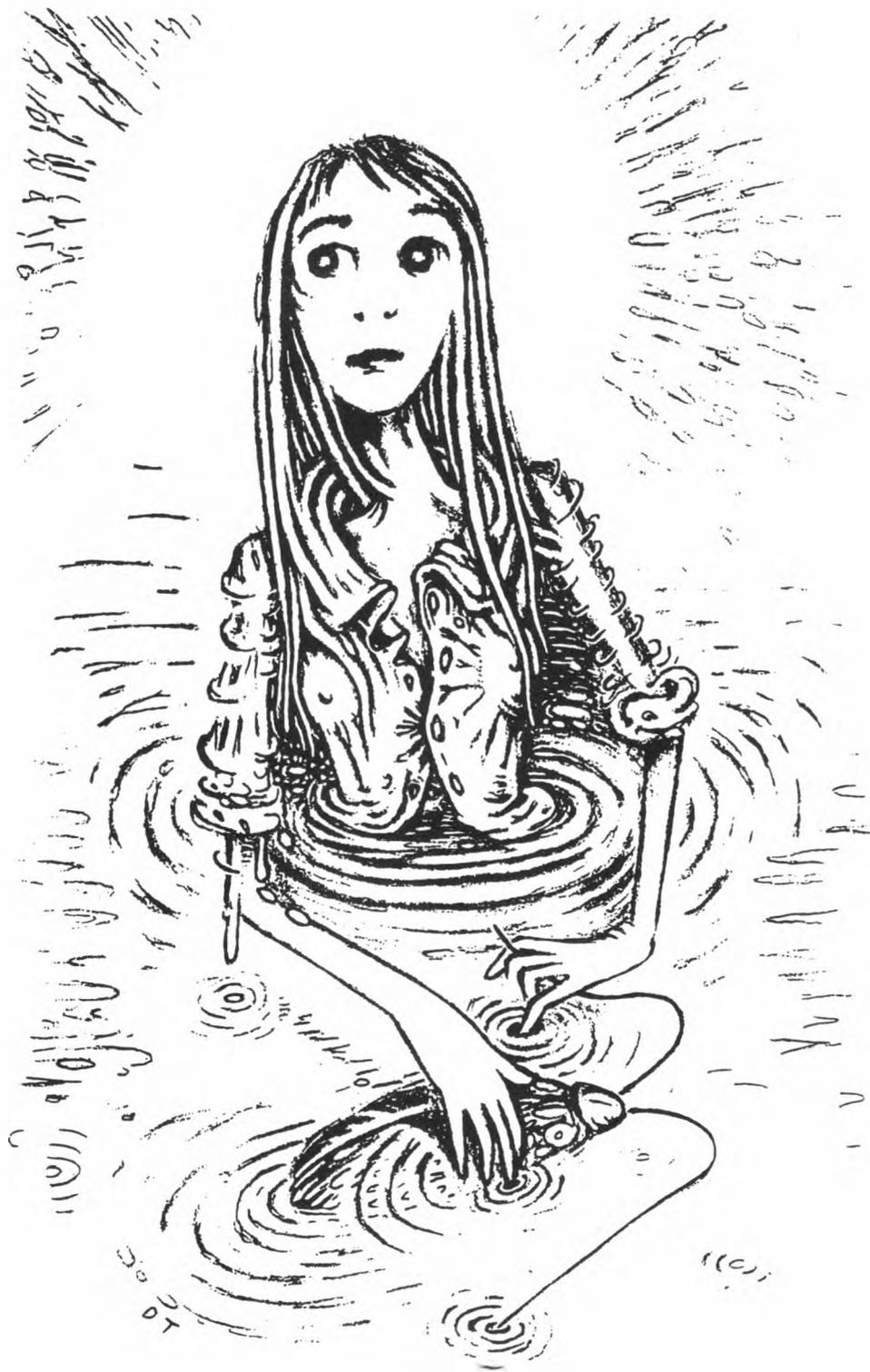
And always coming back to a squashed consciousness
 that ponders events that leave more dead than alive,
 jangled by icons elevated, degraded, manipulated,

trying desperately as the heliotropes
 to follow the sun by just turning their faces.
 Mesmerized by marble busts and coral cameos adored,
 giving, healing, patient as the sands and naked in twilight,
 starting over with infants and seeds.
 I return in increments, a test pattern between breasts,
 unafraid but suspicious of a shrinking universe.
 Instead I find that it expands no matter
 what direction one takes through time.
 It is an invisible uterus that grants me
 the opportunity to be the woman I always wanted to be,
 imagining being unfettered by damage as she/I/we
 dance in nonzero evolutions,
 quantum cosmologies predicting that I may come into existence
 at any moment as a fraction of this endless generation.

Why am I not these women?
 Or am I?
 I plant flowers that seek out brilliance.
 I rule a wormhole that slides me in and out
 of the parallels of my sex.
 I move back through each world of them, getting faster at the intuitive of who I am,
 who she is.

Back before portraits.
 Owl women of death, bear mothers, snake goddesses.
 Sensations shrinking and animalistic,
 animated on cave walls I hear their drums
 and their tongues ululating to produce a resonant echo.
 I put my hand on their swelling bellies
 and rut with horned daimones and dying gods.
 (The heliotropes in my garden are different.
 They are still there but they are now ten feet tall.)

At last...must there be a final depiction?
 (Or a first.)
 On rocks in the valley of Vezere,
 I am become bell-shaped with a dash, a gash,
 only a vulva scratched into stone.
 Down to basics, the womb of the Goddess.
 The sensation is triangular, solid, streaming, warm, gateway.
 I return, wake up, and am in the garden
 surrounded by paths and edges of cowrie shells.
 I turn my rosy purple blossoms toward the sun
 and follow its compelling direction,
 knowing it crosses the sky for me
 as -- daily -- it and I come full circle.



STEALTH

by Betty Nolley
illustrated by Denis Tiani

I was losing my battle to keep the savage fire from spreading to this side of the bayou, and my ass'd go in the shredder if Dad's precious chemical plant, looming behind me, got scorched. Then, around midnight, I noticed the body of a boy sprawled on the opposite bank. I saw immediately he was beyond my help, and sweated even harder inside the plastic moonsuit. Somebody's sure to come looking for him, and Dad'll be pissed as the devil at me. How the hell did the kid get in here, anyway?

The burning subdivision was sealed off by barbed wire barricades that also encircled the Schnarken plant, its tall distillation towers rising above the haze like the minarets of a ghostly mosque.

Dropping the hose I was using to spray the stunted trees and underbrush near the bayou, I yanked aside respirators and head cover and vomited into the murky water, appalled by the youth's distorted face and glazed, empty eyes. Even worse, dark insects, too large to be ants, crept on his body. Goddamn roaches!

Waves of nausea racked me. The huge cockroach that had attacked me when I was a child still stalked my nightmares. Finally, stomach emptied, I wiped my mouth with the stiff gloves. Deprived of filtered, odorless air from the respirators, I nearly choked on the rank smoke from patches of grass and weeds ignited by flying sparks, despite my efforts with the hose. I killed the portable pump, prepared to go back to my aerocycle and call Dad. He'd promised to help me fight the fire but hadn't shown up yet. I wanted to fly home to Houtexcy, but if I left his damn plant in danger of burning he'd skin me alive!

I heard a splash. Bubbles started rising in the center of the bayou. At first I thought it was a big snake, maybe even a 'gator, but as vee-shaped ripples grew a round head surfaced, gliding in my direction. Slender arms reached out to grasp the knobby cypress knees at the edge of the water. A beautiful girl emerged from the depths.

In shock, I removed my head cover and offered to help her climb onto the

bank. Ignoring my extended glove, she pulled herself up. Green eyes met mine boldly. Muddy water streamed from her long blond hair, the shirt tied just below her tempting breasts, and cutoff jeans that molded shapely hips and thighs.

"I'm Jeff Schnarken." I said automatically.

"Call me Delilah," she responded. Her low voice enticed me. A pleasant, fruity odor vied with the reeking smoke. Sudden desire made the shorts beneath my moonsuit tighten at the crotch.

"What the hell're you doin', swimming in Crawfish Bayou?" I demanded. "Don't you know they made Stealth at this plant? That's why the Environmental Defense Department shut down the plant, told residents to evacuate, and built the barricades."

"I've bathed here all my life," she said with a shrug. "What's wrong with Stealth?"

"The feds claim it kills everything, not just the roaches Dad wanted to destroy. He says EDD exaggerates Stealth's toxicity to humans." But he insists I wear the moonsuit when I come here.

"My mama used to work for Schnarken. What're you doin' here?"

"Dad sent me out when he got faxed about the fire. Local firefighters are too chickenshit to go through EDD's warning signs and barbed wire." I pointed to the body. "Who's that kid?"

Delilah scowled. "Called himself Sonny. He set my house on fire."

I started to ask why, but her eyes widened in fear as she stared across the bayou.

"His mama and all her relatives're comin'," she wailed. "Please, you gotta hide me!"

Over the crackling flames, I heard yelling. "Sonny!" A strange group of people surged into view on the opposite bank. Though Dad would say evict the intruders without "wasting" time on the girl, she looked so frightened I couldn't refuse her.

"Here, put my moonsuit on." I shoved the head cover and respirators into Delilah's hands.

While she donned those, I popped the velcro tabs that sealed the spacesuit-like garment, unzipped the front, and stepped out of the boots. Sweat ran down my bare chest and soaked my walking shorts. I inhaled more of her tantalizing scent, like papayas or mangos, and my body responded eagerly as she wriggled into the suit. Regretfully, I velcroed the tabs and helped her put on the gloves and boots.

The approaching crowd soon discovered Sonny's body. A man lifted him and, with a muttered "Sonofabitch," brushed a roach from the boy's pale face.

A woman screamed shrilly. "My God! My poor baby!" She and several others burst into tears. Some threw up, too.

A second man said angrily, "Schnarken's fuckin' toxics killed him. Let's get outta here!"

The woman stopped sobbing, shook her head. "Don't leave yet. I smell perfume. That bitch I saw livin' here murdered him!" She glared across the water at Delilah and me. "Who the hell're you?"

"We're Schnarken Chem employees, trying to protect the plant," I said. "And you're trespassers!"

"That girl's connected with Schnarken, too. The goddamn plant oughta burn, and you along with it!"

The man holding Sonny shouted, "Yeah! You've poisoned our whole county!"

"Bullshit!" I yelled.

"My first husband died of workin' here," the woman cried. "Schnarken's gonna pay for that. And for Sonny!"

The throng, eyes gleaming in their sooty faces, pressed forward. Some threw rocks. I dodged the missiles, wishing I were muscular and macho instead of skinny and scared. Motioning to Delilah, I retreated toward my aerocycle, parked on the other side of the plant. The intruders spread out, searching for a shallow place to cross the bayou.

Cockroaches, desperate to escape the flames, streamed from the subdivision. Big American roaches dominated the horde, though smaller Germans, smoky browns, and larger, lighter-colored Ma-

deiras also squirmed through the weeds toward the chain link fence that enclosed the plant and its grounds. What's in there kills 'em, too, I thought, grimly pleased. As Dad's sign on the front gate proclaimed, "Stealth bombs roaches!"

Followed by the mob, the shrill-voiced woman forded the inlet. Threateningly she held up a burning branch; its light shone through the fence, revealing stacked drums labeled Danger! Highly Flammable. Dad had stored the banned Stealth here, hoping to market it overseas.

I shouted, in my best imitation of him. "Stupid assholes, stay away from the plant. And put out that goddamn torch!"

"No, by God," shrieked the woman. "I'm gonna find my son's killer!" Saliva sprayed from her mouth, like a rabid dog's.

I backed up to avoid being singed by her torch. The roaches trooping through the chain link climbed on the pesticide barrels, not suspecting their peril. About half fell off and flopped onto their backs, dying. The survivors marched steadily onward. I was sure they wouldn't last long.

"Look," said Delilah, her voice muffled by the respirators. "Poor darlings!"

How could she feel sympathy for filthy cockroaches?

I bolted for my 'cycle. Delilah, hampered by the moonsuit, trailed behind. Glancing back, I saw Sonny's shrill-voiced mom and the rest catch up with her.

"Why're you in a suit and he's not?" the woman demanded. "Let's see your face." She reached for the girl's head cover.

I darted through the intruders and grabbed Delilah's arm. We lunged for the plant, since the way to my 'cycle was now blocked.

Sonny's mother screamed for help.

Her relatives surrounded us as I feverishly dug Dad's plant keys from my shorts pocket and unlocked the metallic-mesh gate. Then I broke free of the mob, pulled Delilah through the opening, and slammed the gate, locking it. We headed for the plant entrance, while

the angry relations hurled more rocks and curses. Roach bodies squashed under my bare feet, making me cringe. Finally, we dashed through the double doors, and I locked them after us also. Racing down deserted halls, we put as much distance as possible between ourselves and the trespassers. But I could hear Sonny's mom shrieking, "Break in and get 'em!"

At last we entered the huge chamber at the center of the complex. I pulled its heavy door shut and tried to seal it but couldn't. The acrid, chemical odor of Stealth permeated the air, making breathing difficult. Gradually, my eyes adjusted to the dim light from the high windows, revealing pipes, ladders, and catwalks that crisscrossed between the towering ceiling supports. Unable to run farther, we sank, gasping, to the dusty floor, though shouts and banging outside suggested the search continued.

"Why'd you stay on here after EDD closed the plant?" I asked when I'd gotten my breath.

"Mama loved her house on the bayou. She was a biochemist, thought she could protect us from the pollution. But she got cancer. She died when I was eight." Her husky voice broke. "The roaches raised me. 'Specially Lilah. She showed me how to survive."

Queasily, I recalled Sonny's corpse, crawling with roaches. A chill raced up my spine. How *did* he die?

Though I'd majored in biology, I shared Dad's loathing for cockroaches. When I was a kid, he had punished me by locking me in his workshop with the goddamn bugs he tested his pesticides on. He didn't think they could escape from their cages, but a monstrous South American roach got out and charged me like a bull, spitting black fluid. I'd screamed in terror till Mom rescued me.

As a grad student at Texas A&M, I'd specialized in Lepidoptera, butterflies and moths. I had a research assistantship, but when it ended I was forced to accept Dad's offer of a shitty gofer-job at his Houtexcy plant. He was still pissed that I didn't go to UT Austin and get a Ph.D. in chemistry like he had. He'd even written me out of his will, leaving

his fortune to the fucking Chemical Society. Unless he had grandkids.

"Did Sonny live here?" I asked Delilah.

She shook her head, barely moving the stiff suit. "Two days ago, he cut a hole in the barbed wire and came to my house. Said his mama'd spied on the plant. Knew where I lived. He'd watched me through the fence, too. Claimed he loved me." She paused. "I think he just wanted to get away from his crazy mama. At first, I kinda liked him. But Lilah didn't. So I told him to leave. He got mad and started the fire. Now I don't have anyplace to go."

She sounded so hopeless, I felt sorry for her. But I pictured her lush body under the suit and started getting aroused again. "Don't you know someone in Houtexcy you could stay with?"

"A tall, white-haired man with light blue eyes used to visit us. I don't know where he lives. I called him Booksie, 'cause he always brought us books."

The hair on my nape rose. Her description matched Dad perfectly. "Is he your father?"

"You mean, did he and Mama mate?" Delilah giggled. "She never said. When she got breast cancer, he promised to take care of us. But after she died, he never came back." The girl turned toward me. "What about your mama?"

"She died of cancer, too. A brain tumor." My most painful memories were of Mom's long illness and agonizing death. The coincidence of both our mothers being victims of the same cruel disease made me feel closer to Delilah.

Abruptly, she pulled the velcro tabs apart and slipped out of the protective moonsuit. Her hair had dried into a dirty yellow tangle, and the brown-stained clothes stuck to her body.

"Dammit, you should stay suited-up. This place's full of crappy chemicals." I tried not to think how they might be affecting me.

Delilah's green eyes shone in the dim light. "It's okay. I learned to handle toxics from Lilah and the others. Some aren't even bothered by Stealth. See." She pointed to several large cockroaches

scurrying across the reactor area with no apparent harm. "They can eat almost everything, too. Gee, I'm starved."

I felt uneasy but, remembering a chocolate bar in my pocket, dug the half-melted mess out and gave it to her. She peeled down the paper wrapper and tasted the candy with rapid tongue motions. Taking a tiny bite, she chewed delicately before swallowing; satisfied it was safe, she hunched over and bolted down the rest. Her eating method reminded me of cockroaches' "pretasting," their defense against ingesting poisons.

"That's the best thing I ever ate." She licked the wrapping, then her lips and fingers.

Her heady scent grew stronger, filling my nostrils until I felt dizzy. We lay down and I caressed her enticing bosom, feeling her nipples grow firm under the thin cloth. With rising excitement, I tugged at the mud-encrusted knot beneath her breasts. She gave me a beguiling smile. The odor of fermented fruit seemed to saturate the air. Passion overwhelmed me. We kissed open-mouthed. I tasted an odd, metallic flavor, drew back in momentary shock, but she pulled me down again. She shed her clothes, I yanked off my shorts. When I entered her, I felt a sharp stab. What the hell has she got up there?

Her jerky movements accelerated and my concern faded. I'd had other girls, but nobody like her. She arched her back and came in strong spasms that milked me dry. Ecstasy! For the first time, I thought I was in love.

Afterward, lying beside her, my uneasiness returned. I recalled coming to the Crawfish Bayou subdivision once with Dad, before the barbed wire went up. We entered a large house, and I waited on the musky-smelling patio in back while he went into a bedroom with a beautiful blond woman. A pink-skinned baby toddled into the yard. She caught a small roach or water-bug, as some folks called 'em, and popped it in her mouth. The memory was so vivid it froze my blood, even in the sweltering chamber. Was the child Delilah?

Then I heard the door open and light shone in, making me blink. Dad, I thought with relief.

Then someone called, "Hey guys, that perfume's gettin' stronger. The bitch's in here."

Sounds of running feet and excited male voices reverberated. Several men entered, carrying torches.

Bastards!

I slipped into my shorts and donned the moonsuit impregnated by Delilah's sweetish odor. I got horny again just from the smell. Hoping to decoy the intruders away, I dashed into the center of the chamber.

Roaches buzzed the torches, some catching fire.

"Stop burning my brown butterflies!" Delilah screamed.

The men, spotting her nude body, veered toward her. The one in the lead dropped his pants, while others unzipped theirs. In sophomore entomology I'd learned that female cockroaches emitted a concentrated sex pheromone, one drop of which could excite 50,000 males. Was Delilah's ripe scent, which suffused the chamber despite the stinking chemicals, its human analog?

Four men grabbed her at once. I lunged at them, seething with fury and frustration, as all five rolled lustily on the floor. One man started to gag. He crawled from Delilah, lurched to his feet, and vomited uncontrollably. More sex-starved males jumped to take his place. Fists flew. I dove in to save my love from gang rape, but she seemed not to want salvation. Coolly, she told the men to line up and wait their turns. Those she finished with limped away, their torches extinguished.

Sonny's mom, followed by female relatives, burst through the door and screeched, "What're you doin'?" That whore killed my baby!" Waving her flaming branch, she charged toward Delilah.

I tried to grab the woman. She hit me with the burning stick. My plastic moonsuit melted wherever the flames touched it. Half-blinded by sweat, I barely managed to fend off her blows.

She backed away when a bright rectangle suddenly opened at the rear of the chamber. In the doorway another moon-suited figure appeared, carrying a flashlight. I reached for the woman's torch, but she threw it at Delilah. The chemical-laden dust on the floor began to smolder, releasing dense smoke.

Everyone sprinted for the doors.

I managed to reach the girl, who struggled to free herself from the writhing men as roaches flew in their faces. The second moonsuit put a gloved hand on my shoulder.

"Shit-for-brains!" Dad's deep voice grated from the respirators. "You let those goddamn idiots set my plant afire. Move!" He started dragging me outside.

"Wait for Delilah!" I bent and grasped the girl's hand.

Dad shoved through the mob to the back exit. Delilah and I pounded behind him. We stumbled out onto the grass as those who had escaped with us let out a collective gasp, shrinking from the girl. I stared at her in horror. Two segmented appendages waved from between her legs. Parting her thighs, she crouched. A large insect emerged, long antennae snaking from its head. With a shudder, I realized what had stabbed me inside her!

Dad pulled a can from his backpack and sprayed pesticide at the girl. She coughed, covering her mouth and nose. The big roach flew onto Dad's face plate. He tried to spray it, too.

Delilah cried, "Lilah, no!"

Fluid spurted from between the cockroach's gaping palpi and mandibles; black liquid bubbled like acid on Dad's respirators. As I rushed toward him, he collapsed.

Delilah fled, surrounded by cockroaches.

Flames and smoke erupted from the doorway of the plant, cutting off the shrieks of those trapped inside. The ground trembled. A powerful detonation shook the reaction chamber, crumpled the roof, leveled the out-buildings, and buckled the fence. The distillation towers twisted and bent grotesquely.

I stumbled backwards, trying to avoid the drums of Stealth that exploded like

incendiary bombs. Flying debris filled the air. Everything except the bayou seemed to be burning, as I searched frantically for Dad. Finally spotting his moonsuit, I hoisted his limp body onto my back.

Weighted down, I headed towards the water, but tripped and fell in the blazing grass and weeds. I couldn't breathe; thick smoke clogged my respirators. Choking, I ripped them off and discarded the head cover. I stumbled on, dragging Dad. My suit was roasting, and progress seemed agonizingly slow. At last we reached the bayou. I dove in. Welcome coolness enveloped my aching body, and I lost consciousness.

As dawn brightened the sky I woke, immersed to my neck in swampy water. Sitting up, I looked around. The plant still smoldered, though detonations had ceased. I saw the blackened corpses of several of Sonny's relatives and felt amazed to have survived. When I opened Dad's moonsuit, I realized he too was dead. I felt a combination of loss, regret, and grief. I'd loved him, in a way, but I couldn't mourn him.

Delilah, still naked, rose from the bayou and shook water from herself. She looked down at me and grinned. "My buddies are having babies."

A huge cockroach crept onto Dad's nose and deposited a pellet-shaped egg case. Then the roach reared up and spat at my face. Filled with revulsion, I ducked most of the black fluid, but a metallic taste flooded my mouth as I sank into the water to escape the venomous spittle. I surfaced, grabbed a sizeable rock, and smashed it into the roach, grinding its dark body into Dad's forehead. Trembling, I fought off another attack of nausea.

"You killed Lilah, my best friend. You're bad as Booksie. I hate you both!" Kicking Dad's body, Delilah burst into tears.

"Lilah was lethal!" I sputtered, standing up.

Dad's ruined nose erupted in a flood of tiny roaches. The cool mud had soothed my scorched feet and legs, but now they burned again. Shucking the blackened,

water-soaked moonsuit. I saw hordes of little roaches climbing up my legs, headed for my balls. They stung worse than fireants! I tried to brush them off, but they clung tenaciously. More baby roaches emerged from the other bodies. Dad's efforts to exterminate cockroaches had made even their nymphs vicious!

I panicked. Ignoring Delilah's protests and the pain in my legs and feet. I dragged her from the bayou. Her irresistible scent washed over me and I still desired her, despite the realization she was my half-sister. We struggled past my destroyed aerocycle to Dad's black jet-copter, parked beyond the charred area but inside the barricade. Luckily I still had his spare keys, including the one for the jet.

As I lifted Delilah onto the passenger seat, a large brown cylinder poked from between her legs. Smiling, she pulled it out and cradled it to her mud-coated breast.

Changeable as Texas weather, she astounded me. She and Lilah had been symbionts, as well as lovers!

In the cockpit I found an oil-soaked rag to wipe away the biting nymphs. We took off, flying over two emergency rescue vehicles that arrived belatedly, manned by moonsuited Schnarken employees. When they found Dad's body, I'd be out of a job.

The girl hugged the capsule and said, "Where'll we live? This is just our first batch of babies. We'll make hundreds!"

I felt total despair. Then the solution hit me, and I headed for Dad's Silver Oaks mansion, instead of my tiny bed-kitch. She calls roaches brown butterflies; they aren't so different from Lepidoptera. I can claim paternity, and whatever hatches from the egg case will inherit the Schnarken millions! ❖

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LETTERS [continued from page 29] the unfortunate effect of coloring my views of small press publications as I fell into the pit of stereotypes.

Well, that all changed recently when I took a trip into Washington D.C., for some business. On some free time on my way out of the city I stopped in a Borders Books and Music store. Unlike the stores in my area, this one had quite a healthy selection of small press sci-fi mags. On a whim I decided to sample them all. The titles included *Pirate Writings*, *Absolute Magnitude* and of course *Space & Time*. By now I think it is pretty obvious where I am leading with this. Your magazine blasted every preconception I held about small press straight out of the water. From the format to the content I was consistently impressed with the high quality of *Space & Time*. It is a pity I did not know about this magazine sooner.

Down to details, here is my take on issue #87. First let me say that I read the big name magazine (*Analog*, *Asimov's*, *Fantasy & Science Fiction*) on a regular basis, and have noticed on average that there is about one story per issue that will deeply affect me. This is what floored me about *Space & Time*, four of the stories crawled right up under my skin and rattled my soul. Those would be (in no particular order of preference): "Yesterday and Today," "Welcome to Merland," "Restoring Order," and "The Baobab Tree." These stories by themselves made the issue worth it. In particular, I really enjoyed "The Baobab Tree," which I found to be a refreshingly original take on some often overused science-fictional themes of genetic engineering and societal conformity. Hats off to Mr. Ginzler for adeptly transforming cliched sf ideas into witty commentary and allegory without coming across as heavy handed moralizing. I think we have all felt like the MadOne at one point or another.

At this point I feel guilty for actually having something negative to say, but I must admit that "Paradise Lost" offended my sensibilities. Perhaps I misinterpreted it, but I took away a rather bizarre anti-science message from it. I have read a lot of science and logic non-fiction in my time. In particular, I very much enjoy Carl Sagan's books. Science and logic are not just a way of thinking to me, they are a way of life. Now many people ask me how I can enjoy Fantasy writing

so much, since it obviously seems to contradict my beliefs with its tales of magic and sorcery, etc. But that question puzzles me more than I puzzle them. Good Fantasy is full of symbolism and allegory as tools to further theme. Literal interpretation of fiction is beyond ignorance. Yet it definitely appeared to me that Don Webb was presenting a literal interpretation of magic in myth as the basis of his theme. Then we are led to believe that science is the enemy come to destroy this putative natural order of the world. Not only do I find this line of thinking silly and ill-logical, I find it dangerous to societal well being. Understanding of the allegory and morality taught through myth and tradition can coexist with science and knowledge without conflict. The universe can be seen as magical and miraculous without supernatural interpretations. As many sf writers have said, we are nothing more than lumps of dust in awe of the universe.

One last comment (or rather a question). "Christmas at the Chushingura Cafe" was listed as being written by Stephen Dedham. Is this a typo? For there is an author named Stephen Dedman (who I believe just published a novel called *The Art of Arrow Cutting*) writing in the sf field. These names are so close and rather unique that I had to wonder.

{Wonder no more; we did indeed screw up Stephen's last name, though at least we did so consistently; I personally suspect a gremlin in the spell checker who, instead of substituting a correct spelling for a typo, went the other way throughout the issue! Apologies cannot be profuse enough. - GL}

Jeffrey Ford

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Medford Lakes NJ 08055

Congratulations on your 30th anniversary issue. That is a remarkable run for any kind of magazine. I bet the story of *S&T* is as much a fantasy/science fiction/horror tale as anything you have published. I like the old format, as you in your letters column admitted as well, but the new, with the color cover, is pretty nice too. You have managed to retain the best quality of the magazine, namely its eclectic range of offerings with each issue. Your willingness to take a chance with untried authors, ideas [see inside back cover]



REMEMBRANCE OF THINGS TO COME

by Mario Milosevic
illustrated by David Grilla

"What happens is these bones in your ears vibrate against each other bang bang and then you get Mozart in your soul. And then...you let go. It's my most vivid memory. It'll always be my best memory."

Lee nodded, looking past the woman through the train's window where the wide Columbia River, flowing west with the train and drowning the Washington-Oregon state line, seemed to pull him away from his wife, Anne, almost two days behind him now, in Laramie. Sailboarders crossed and recrossed the river, their tiny craft balanced between the water's current and the wind, blowing in the exact opposite direction.

"But I'm boring you, aren't I?" said the woman. She had boarded the train only a couple of hours ago in Pendleton.

"No," said Lee. "No. I love Mozart." He forced a smile, felt his face flush. "I've never thought of it quite like that, bones hitting each other. It's an interesting way to look at it."

The woman patted his hand. "That's fine. I'm not so old yet that I can't tell when I'm putting someone to sleep. Tell me about your life."

Lee didn't like the sound of the wheels on the rails under the car. Clack-clack, clack-clack, clack-clack. It sure didn't put Mozart in his soul.

"Well, my name's Lee."

"That's a nice name."

"I guess," said Lee. That sounded stupid.

"My name is Rose, after my grandmother." She paused. Lee could see she was remembering something. "The past, you know. It leaves you. People think it's always there, but it isn't. It goes away, and there's nothing you can do about it."

Lee nodded again. He thought of his own past, thirty years. Three decades. If he was lucky, a third of his life. If he was unlucky, maybe half.

"I still think about my first wife."

"First wife? My goodness, you're hardly old enough to be married, let alone divorced."

"Not divorce," said Lee. "Lisa died of cancer. I still love her. Anne and I have been married a couple of years now, but

I still love Lisa. It's causing us -- problems. I love Anne, I do. But I still love Lisa. I guess. I don't know. How do you love someone who's dead? I try to explain it to Anne." He searched for something more to say. "She doesn't understand. I don't know how to explain it."

"Well of course," said Rose, patting his hand again. "These things can be hard." Lee found he liked the contact with this stranger. "Your music must give you comfort."

"My music?"

"Of course. You are a musician, aren't you?"

"Yes, but how--?"

Rose pointed to the overhead storage compartment. "I saw your violin case when I came on at Pendleton."

"Oh," said Lee, feeling as though he sat beside some detective out of a trashy mystery novel.

"You know what I like about trains?" said Rose. "I like that people will tell you things. They'll talk to you when they normally wouldn't give you the time of day. They'll tell you all their secrets, all about themselves. People don't do that on planes, because you're on a plane for such a short time. But a train. You kind of live on a train. You make friends on a train. It's more like being with family. Don't you think so?"

Lee nodded, noticing for the first time that Rose clutched a thick tattered notebook. It slipped off her lap as she talked, flopping open on the seat between them. He saw it was scrawled throughout with handwriting. Rose looked at Lee. He felt instantly embarrassed. She patted his hand again.

"Don't worry about it," said Rose. "There's nothing there to hide from anyone, really. It's my memory now. I write everything down in it that I need to remember. It's how the past stays with me now. But we were talking about you. Where are you going today?"

"Visiting my sister in Oregon."

"You're traveling alone. Why didn't your wife come with you?"

Lee shrugged. "Anne doesn't get along with Fran." She also hates my guts right

now, he thought, but Rose doesn't have to know that.

"Don't worry about it," said Rose. "I think I didn't get along with my own brother. We fought and fought." She opened the tattered notebook and flipped a few pages. "Yes, it's right here. See?"

She held it up for Lee to look at. He grasped a corner and held it steady. Rose smiled at him. A line at the bottom of the page said it all "Harold -- nickname Harry -- younger brother -- pain in the ass -- cheap -- crude -- liar -- died 1983 -- lousy food at funeral -- good riddance."

Lee coughed. "I see."

Rose laughed. "Oh, don't let it bother you. I have notes like that on everyone I knew." She leaned close to him and whispered. "It's actually easier this way. I don't have to purge myself of any nasty memories of the old bastard."

"You, um, you say you have notes like this on everyone you knew?"

"Sure." She patted the notebook. "Without this I'm lost. Most everyone in my family has one of these. My grandmother showed me how to use one when I was just a little girl. Of course I didn't use it then. I had my whole life ahead of me. All those memories spread out like a magic carpet. What did I have to fret about? But it all changed around forty. I lost something then, the feeling that there was more to come. The balance tipped, you see. There was more gone than there was to come. Do you see what I mean?"

Lee felt mystified. He wanted to take that notebook out of her hand and read every word.

Her Bones Never Found
by Mary Winters

Flesh morphing to foliage
fallen leaves on a dead body
the oak conjured up.

Humans long gone from the woods

Remember the one who brought a book?
How to Relax: "Pretend you're a log."

Sinking into pine needles
soft and red-blond as fur.

"The doctors told us we were different. Something in the genes, I guess. They studied us, prodded and poked at us. I didn't like it, I can tell you. Wrote it all here, so I know." She turned and looked out the window.

The train was slowing down. Clack, clack. Clack, clack. Clack, clack. The grass outside resolved itself from layers of green streaks to patches of spiky blades. Lee felt woozy as he stared.

"But now it's all coming to an end," she said.

"Oh, is this your stop?"

"No, no, not my stop. Lee. *My life*. My life is coming to an end."

"Don't talk like that. You have a lot of years left."

Rose smiled at him. "You're a dear young man, but you see. *I know*."

The train jerked as it stopped. Around them people pulled down bags from their perches on the shelves above the seats. Lee felt that melancholy that always seemed close at hand whenever he neared his destination. The traveling was what he enjoyed. The motion. Now Hood River was only three or four stations away.

As they waited for the people and their belongings to get off and the new passengers to get settled, Rose and Lee didn't talk. It felt wrong to say anything.

It wasn't until they restarted and the train's wheels went clack-clack, clack-clack again that Rose resumed talking. "Our brains were wired for sound, not smell. You know how you can smell something and it reminds you of a whole lifetime spent somewhere else? That didn't work for me. If I smelled something I didn't get a memory. But if I heard something, it went right to the memory center of my brain. Sound. Music. I listen to music and a whole universe slides into my soul. All my memories of what I will ever be."

Lee listened and nodded but did not say a word. Rose seemed far away again. "It's cozy, isn't it," she said after a few minutes. "Riding along like this. Knowing there's something ahead. Forgetting about the past, the stops we went

through. How many, do you think? How many stations did we stop at?"

"Since Pendleton? I don't know. Maybe five." Lee shrugged. "I don't know."

"But you have an idea. I don't. It's all gone, Lee. Where does your sister live?"

"Hood River."

"Hood River. Yes. That's where I'm going, too, to visit my son and die. It's a lovely little town, isn't it? I see it in my mind's eye. It'll still be beautiful four days from now. I'll go outside and sit on the veranda and watch the river below me. My son will bring me something to drink and I'll listen to Mozart." She stared at Lee. "A violin concerto. There's nothing more beautiful. And you'll be there, Lee, yes, you don't know it yet but it's in my memory." She tapped her forehead.

"What do you mean, it's in your memory?"

"Just that. I remember backwards, Lee. Everyone in my family does. We remember the future, but not the past. Our brains, I told you. Wired strange. I only have a few days left to me. Not even a hundred hours, but those hundred hours are strong, bright and real. Vivid as the green banks of this river in spring, after the rain stops and the air is as clear as glass. Those hundred hours spread out in front of me like a small carpet now. A rug really. Tiny, but bright. Beautiful. You do know Mozart, don't you, Lee? You must, with -- Well. Never mind."

Sure he knew Mozart, thought Lee, but how did she know? How could she 'remember' the future?

"I looked up trains," said Rose, holding up her notebook again. "I wrote that sometimes traveling companions, the ones you meet unexpectedly just because you're both going in the same direction, sometimes they can be the strongest bonds of all. You tell each other so much. Isn't that true, Lee?"

Lee couldn't argue. He suddenly felt the need to tell her everything. "My wife hates me. I talk to Lisa in my sleep. I don't mean to, but--" He shrugged. "Anne says she can't stand having a ghost in the bedroom with her, so...here I am going to spend time with my sister.

Now I miss Anne," he said glumly. "And Lisa too."

Rose smiled at him and patted his hand again. "The past goes away, Lee. Just give it time. That's all Anne needs, some time. That's all Lisa needs, too."

She turned away and settled back in her chair and closed her eyes. Lee felt drowsy and desperate and drifted off to sleep until the train pulled into Hood River station. Lee helped Rose off the train and saw that she got safely into her son's car.

As he watched the car disappear into the distance, his sister drove up. It wasn't until he got to Fran's house that he found Rose's notebook inside the small bag he had had under his train seat.

He had the notebook tucked under his arm and his violin case in his hand three days later when he knocked on the door of Rose's son's house. The address had been conveniently written into one of the last pages of the notebook.

Rose's son answered the door and invited him in. "She's in the back, Lee," he said. "On the veranda."

Lee nodded. They walked through the house, neither saying anything.

Rose greeted them with a smile and a sigh. "I told you," she said.

Lee nodded. "You told me." He offered her the notebook.

Rose took it. "Thank you, but it's no use to me now. It's near the end."

"I know," said Lee.

"Did you read it?"

Lee nodded.

"Good. I wanted you to. You know more about my life than I do now. Was it a good one?"

Lee glanced at Rose's son, who smiled silently.

"Yes," said Lee. "It was a good life."

"Good. I remember one last thing." She picked up the notebook and flipped pages furiously for a time. "Here it is. I wrote it on the train. Anne?"

Rose's son handed her a glass of lemonade with ice. The ice cubes clinked against the glass, playing a bright tune.

"Anne's fine. After I read your notebook I wrote out my life with Lisa in my

own notebook. I've got it safely stored away now."

"You talked to Anne?"

Lee nodded. "On the phone. I told her Lisa would never come between us again."

Rose's son took her hand in his and sat beside her and stroked her hair. The air was clear and bright. The river spread out in the distance like a gleaming blue ribbon. Lee opened his violin case and drew out the instrument. Rose closed her eyes and leaned back in the chair. "Nothing left now," she murmured. "Nothing but the bang bang bang of those tiny bones. I've remembered this moment my whole life."

Lee brought the violin under his chin and pulled the bow across the strings. Mozart filled the air. ❖

FRACTAL PARADISE by Nancy Ellis Taylor

I can build for us
a land for love
Streams opalescent
in their refraction
mountains adamantine
crushed sapphire skies

Hills and valleys
virgin to touch
all life electric

A land for us
sequentially
to explore
no dream
too fleeting
to multiply
to bend
to our desire

We will live
as if winged
among wonders

Until
it is time to
run howling
naked as lightning
from paradise

LETTERS [continued from page 45] and styles keeps *Space & Time* vital no matter its chronological age.

F. Gwynplaine MacIntyre
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I have seen the two most recent issues of *Space and Time* and I'm very impressed, not only with your magazine's content and layout but equally impressed with your distribution: a life-or-death factor for many alternative-press publications. *Space and Time* is showing up in all the right bookstalls and magazine kiosks.

Based on what little I've seen, I'm impressed with your art director's ability to juxtapose several different styles of typographics and line art in the same issue without clashing. The various styles look well together, and there are layers within layers. In your Summer '97 number, I was especially impressed with Cathy Miller Burgoyne's illustration on page 26, which not only illustrates the accompanying story but manages also to be a tribute to the cult horror-film *Black Sunday* (the upturned female face in Ms Burgoyne's drawing is clearly inspired by a famous publicity photo of the actress Barbara Steele as she appeared in that film). My compliments all round!

Jeffrey Somers
293 Griffith Street #9
Jersey City NJ 07307

The new look is pretty exciting, although I have to say I preferred the smaller trim size. Hell, I modeled my own 'zine on those great late 80's/early 90's *S&T* issues.

Harriett Houston
100 Perkins Street
Goldsboro NC 27530

There are two things I wasn't a bit happy with. The print's too small and the size is awkward to hold. Had to read it at my card-table because I had to dig out my magnifying glass instead of reading in bed as I usually do. Took almost a month to finish. That's just age and

eyes I'm talking about, but I can't help wondering if you got any other complaints.

On the up side, I liked your stories, always have, because they're so different, never boring 'cause I don't know what to expect. Keep up the good work.

Norman Finlay
50 Sloan Street
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I bought *Space and Time* no. 86 from an independent distributor in England. I'm writing to tell you how much I enjoyed reading your magazine. A little different is how I would describe the stories, but more of that in a couple of paragraphs.

I'm a longtime fan of sf and fantasy. In the 'seventies I was quite a collector. But I got caught in collecting for the sake of it and bought books at such a rate I often couldn't read all I bought. The usual personal changes happened and I sold my collection. I kept the letters that I received from others in the field like the late Karl Wagner, Bill Warren and Charles Saunders.

I had quite a collection of small press, too: *Nyctalops*, *Xenophile*, *Amra*.

I wonder if my memory is correct when I write that I seem to recall having a *Space and Time* which was printed on a Gestetner and featured a story by Darrell Schweitzer about the owner of an antique shop?

I particularly enjoyed "Bursting Out" by Faith Miller. She kept me wondering what her character was going to reveal. But in the end it was the reader who had to supply the answers.

I found the poetry very thoughtful. "Saginaw" was a wonderful piece. If I read it correctly my feelings were that it was critical of some aspects of the USA. That intrigues me. I like to get close to the expression of people suffering. In small doses I think it is healthy. Especially when we consider that much of the modern cult of happiness would seem to be based on an utter rejection of suffering. Patriotism without criticism is like food without salt. Personally, I like a good deal of seasoning.

Anyway, it's nice to return to the fold. It's a good feeling to return to reading the small press after twenty years. I'll be taking further issues of *S&T* when I get my next catalogue.

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