

Three-time Hugo Award Nominee

Printed in the USA

# ABORIGINAL SCIENCE FICTION

Tales of the Human Kind, Issue Nos. 59 & 60

Winter 1998 / \$5.95 U.S. & \$6.95 Canada

## *Really Big Projects*

### Stories by:

J. Brooke

Keith  
Brooke

Carroll  
Brown

Eric Brown

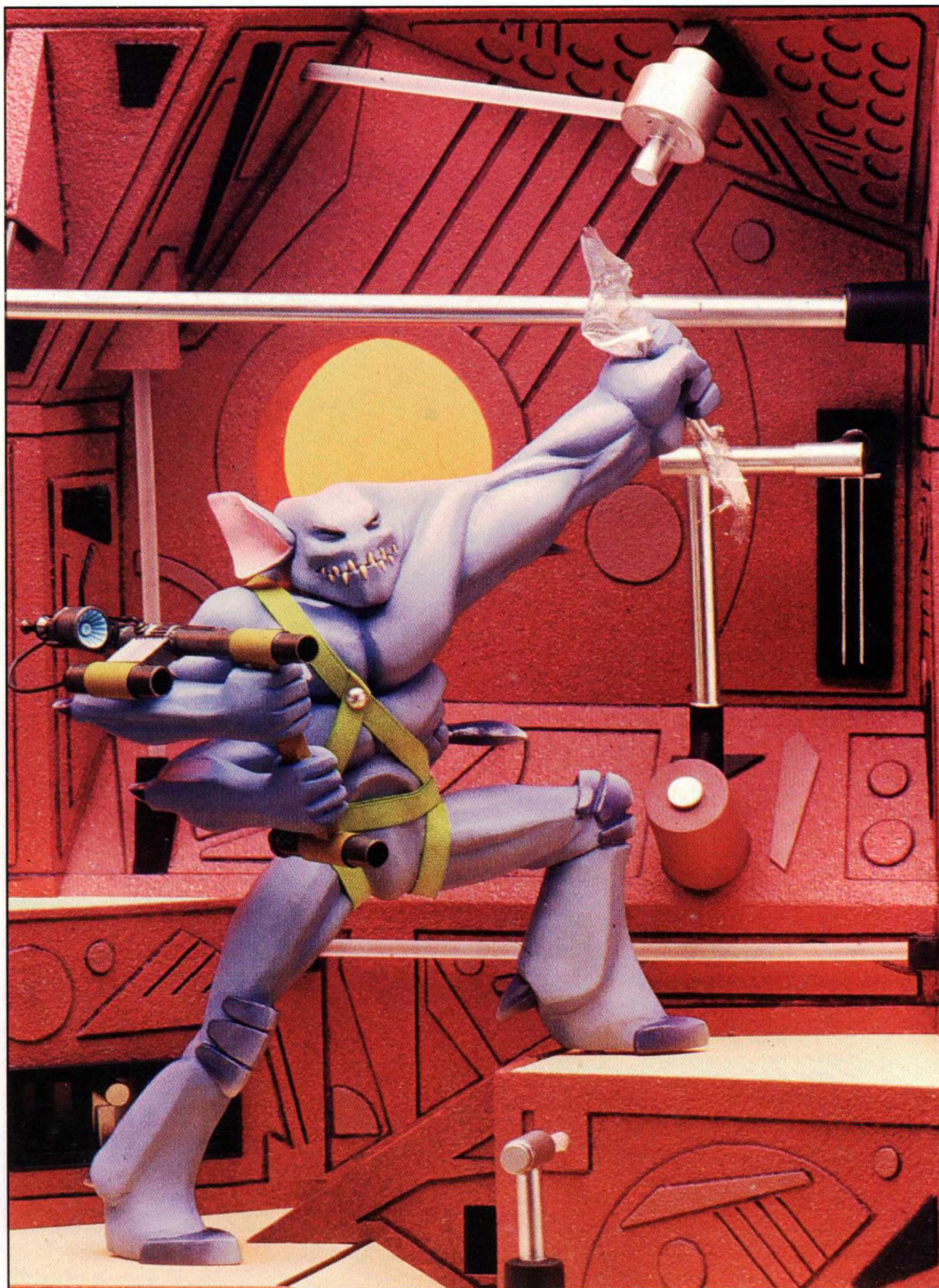
Marc  
Levinthal

Stephen  
Wallenfels

B. McLaren

and more ...

Two Book  
Review  
Columns



# Contents

## Aboriginal Science Fiction, No. 59 & 60



Page 4



Page 12



Page 20



Page 24

### Short Stories

<i>The Domegame and Mr. P.</i> By Keith Brooke; Art by Alan Gutierrez	4
<i>Going with Fergus</i> By Carroll Brown; Art by Peggy Ranson	12
<i>The E-Ticket</i> By J. Brooke; Art by Larry Blamire	20
<i>Angel with a Stainless-Steel Soul</i> By B. McLaren; Art by Jon Foster	24
<i>Watching Maynard</i> By Stephen Wallenfels; Art by David LeClerc	34
<i>Lou's Seventh Cylinder</i> By Marc Levinthal; Art by Lubov	56
<i>Venus Macabre</i> By Eric Brown; Art by Jael	62



Page 3

### Departments

<i>Cover Illustration: The Motie</i> By David Deitrick	1
<i>Our Alien Publisher</i> By A Crazy Alien	3
<i>Aborigines</i> By Laurel Lucas	48
<i>Classifieds</i>	23
<i>From the Bookshelf</i> By Mark L. Olson	38
<i>Books</i> By Darrell Schweitzer	43
<i>Editor's Notes</i> By Charles C. Ryan	50
<i>What If? — Science</i> By Robert A. Metzger	51

**Editor**  
Charles C. Ryan

**Publisher**  
A crazy alien

**Assistant Editors:**  
Laurel Lucas  
Janice M. Eisen  
Sherry Briggs  
Mary C. Ryan  
Jennifer Boles  
Charlene Brusso  
Steven Patten  
Jenise Bushman Aminoff  
Craig Gardner  
Mike McComas

**Advertising**  
Warren Lapine  
1-540-633-2220

*Aboriginal Science Fiction* (ISSN 0895-3198) is published quarterly by The 2nd Renaissance Foundation, Inc., a non-profit educational and literary organization, in March, June, September, and December for \$21.50 a year. *Aboriginal Science Fiction* has editorial offices at 12 Emeline St., Woburn, MA 01801. (All business mail should be directed to: DNA Publications P.O. Box 2449, VA 01888.) Periodical (Second) Class Postage Rates paid at Woburn, MA, and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *Aboriginal Science Fiction* P.O. Box 2449, Woburn, MA 01888-0849. The normal single copy price is \$5.95 (plus \$1.75 postage-handling). Subscriptions are: \$21.50 for 4 issues, \$39 for 8 and \$55 for 12. Canadian and foreign subscriptions are: \$26 for 4 issues, \$48 for 8 issues and \$68 for 12 issues. Material from this publication may not be reprinted or used in any form without permission. Copyright © 1998 by *Aboriginal Science Fiction* and individually copyrighted by the authors and artists who have contributed to

this Winter 1998 issue, Volume 9, Number 3, whole copy Numbers 59 & 60 published in October 1998.

*Aboriginal Science Fiction* welcomes free-lance submissions. All submissions must be accompanied by a self-addressed and stamped envelope large enough for the material's return in the event it is not deemed suitable by the editorial staff. *Aboriginal Science Fiction* publishes original science fiction in the form of short stories between 2,500 and 6,500 words. Payment is \$200 upon publication. Any submission not accompanied by a return envelope and adequate return postage will not be returned. The publisher assumes no liability for unsolicited manuscripts or other materials. Writer's guidelines are available only if requests are accompanied by a self-addressed stamped envelope. *Aboriginal Science Fiction* welcomes letters to the editor. All letters should be sent to: *Aboriginal Science Fiction*, Boomerangs, P.O. Box 2449, Woburn, Mass. 01888-0849. All letters to the

editor become the property of *Aboriginal Science Fiction* and may be reproduced, in an edited, or unedited form at the discretion of the editors.

**ADVERTISING RATES** are available on request by writing to Advertising Director, *Aboriginal Science Fiction* P.O. Box 2449, Woburn, MA 01888-0849 (tel. 781-935-9326).

**BOOK REVIEWS:** Publishers who would like books to be reviewed should send one copy to Darrell Schweitzer, 113 Deepdale Road, Strafford, PA 19087; or to: Mark L. Olson, 10 Shawmut Terrace, Framingham, MA 01701, and one copy to: *Aboriginal Science Fiction*, P.O. Box 2449, Woburn, MA 01888-0849. *Aboriginal Science Fiction* would like to thank Essex County Newspapers and various members of SFWA (Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America) for their encouragement and assistance.

# Become a Millionaire

Please excuse this intrusion, but I have news that might change your life forever.

That's right! YOU CAN BECOME A MULTI-MILLIONAIRE THROUGH THE MIRACLE OF MULTI-LEVEL MARKETING! AND, DESPITE COMMON SENSE AND ANY CLAIMS TO THE CONTRARY, IT'S ALL COMPLETELY LEGAL!

Just months ago, I was a complete loser much like you, spending my days at a dead-end job, my nights and weekends thumbing through science fiction magazines much like the one you now hold in your hands. And then, through the miracle of Computer Spam, I discovered the secret that would free me from my world of drudgery, make it possible for me to jet to exotic places, meet Hollywood starlets, and write this tediously long promotional piece which is somehow supposed to convince you to follow in my footsteps!

There. By now most readers will have had their eyes glaze over or have been forced to turn the page. In my continuing survey of the social norms of Earth, I have finally found the perfect transmission medium for my reports back to my homeworld. For, to the typical earthling, nothing is as boring as Spam.

Therefore, nothing could be better than Spam to hide my most recent findings. Excuse me for a minute.

**WORK OUT OF YOUR OWN HOME! \$50,000 A WEEK FOR 15 MINUTES OF WORK A DAY! JUST FOLLOW THESE 658 EASY STEPS!**

We must keep up appearances, after all. Most of those still curious enough to scan the article have now gone elsewhere.

But back to Spam.

Throughout human civilization, there has always been some form of Spam. Oh, certainly, as you go further into the past, it would go by different names — sweepstakes, junk mail, phone solicitations, lotteries, patent medicine, carny sideshows, manifest destiny

— the list goes on and on. Easy money, something for nothing, almost too good to be true. Spam might look like it hides solid gold. But the true center of Spam is always the same. The humans have a word for it — hoey.

Spam is eternal. Only the transmission system has changed. In ancient times, humans were forced to bring the hoey first on foot, then by oxcart. Later they turned to mail carrier and phone line.

Then everything changed with



the so-called "computer revolution." The delivery of those predecessors of modern Spam sometimes took actual effort. Now, thanks to the primitive computers of Earth and this shapeless mass referred to as the "World Wide Web," a simple press of the button will make the hoey go everywhere!

And some say that human civilization isn't marching forward.

But, you no doubt ask, now that you have located the low point of human endeavor, what about those more rarefied? What about the rest of civilization?

Which brings me to my most recent discoveries. When I first

took on this assignment, I admit that I found myself frustrated by the huge amount of data flung out every day within this culture. It was quite overwhelming. Without the proper guidelines, how could I possibly hope to rate the real importance of such everyday concepts as the appearance of fine lines and wrinkles vs. cash-back bonuses?

You can see my dilemma.

I thought again of the analytical approach so favored by my predecessor — perhaps, I thought, too analytical. His very problem in getting to the true core of the way things worked here might have been that distance he kept from the masses.

(You'll note that I refer to my predecessor by a single pronoun for simplicity's sake.

Therefore, my predecessor becomes "he" even though the actuality of "his" exact sexual configuration was much more interesting, not to mention possibly illegal in certain southern states.)

I could not make the same mistake! I realized I would have to leave the rarefied confines of the editorial offices of this magazine and journey to the true center of modern American culture, the "indoor mall."

So it was that I began my first investigative field trip. And, in entering this strange new world, I found myself surrounded by bright lights, pleasing sounds, and fast food of many lands. Obviously, I had made the correct choice!

But, again, as I indicated above, simple observation would not be enough. I needed to initiate conversation with the inhabitants of this place: groups of roaming nomads, usually segregated by sex, known as "teens," and a secondary, older group, constantly on the move, wearing distinctively bright clothing known as "jogging outfits," who referred to themselves as "retirees."

After many conversations with these mall dwellers, I found certain symbols to have great commonality, for good or ill. Spam was there, certainly, but there seemed

**Continued to Page 42**

# The Domegame and Mr. P.

By Keith Brooke

Art by Alan Gutierrez

**T**hey're all around us. I can sense them, *feel* them, as if I have some kind of an extra sense.

I look up, see the cool, moist surface of a girder hung across the narrow passage. Chunky rivets pock its spine, droplets of water catch the light, warning me, setting my brain on edge.

I glance at Sonny and Mud-Pie to either side. They're scared. Tight muscles etch their faces in weird relief. Eyes twitch, catching the menacing light. Several streets away a woman screams for more.

I look back at the girder and see a figure in the shade. Face catching a transient sliver of light tells me it's Rainchild up there in the gray, a heavy chain trailing easily from her left hand. I peer into the shadows, strain to see. It can't be Rainchild: it's an enemy, a Foe. Waiting to jump us.

Why did I think it was Rainchild? I don't even *know* any Rainchild.

**W**e turn back. Away from the girder, the shadow with the eyes that are aglint. Sonny's carrying an injury from a run-in four blocks back, his wrist all crushed to a pulp. Seems like it was days ago — the ambush, the fight, the transience of victory turning to panic as more of them close in on all sides and we barely drag ourselves free, the three of us, leaving four comrades to their fate — but it's only hours.

It's only ever hours, but ... I don't know, don't seem to know anything these days.

And then we stop as one. Turn. Head back for the passage, the girder.

Mud-Pie picks up a brick and tosses his club over to Sonny, who catches it with his good hand. "Screw 'em good, won't we, Mister? Do 'em good, huh?" They all call me Mister. I'm the oldest here in the Dome, so I guess the name has stuck. I don't know.

All I know is we're going back down the passageway and the girder's up ahead and they're sitting on it now, in the open, not even trying to hide.

They think we're that easy.

We'll show them. It's as if I've suddenly had this wave breaking over my head, only from the inside, if you can see what I mean. A passion, an urge, like the Lord is telling me we can do it, we can beat them, grind them down. They're the enemy and we're going to pulp them.

Six of them, sitting there, waiting for us. Two stand as we get closer. The light flickers for a moment and they hesitate, but then it's okay and the one that's like this Rainchild rises to a crouch,

meets my eyes. She's small, wiry, looks fast, has three teeth missing right at the front, her nose broken in several places.

An Eye is halfway up the frontage of the nearest building. It looks as if a dark soap bubble, but behind the black diamond shield is an array of mini-lenses, looking down at four different angles. I know how the thing works, but that doesn't matter right now, with this woman staring me out, wanting me dead.

I have myself a club and I've set shards of metal and glass into the end. I know it's wrong, but somehow, if I don't look at it, I can pretend it's just a normal stick and then it all seems okay.

They should wait until we get closer, but they don't. Synchronized, like a troupe of dancers, they drop to the same level as us, fan out.

"You bastard, Janocek," I yell, turning so the Eye has me at a good angle. I don't understand how I know that the woman's name is Janocek, it's just one of these feelings, I guess, like you get sometimes if you've been in the Dome for long enough. "No more sub-routines 'til ten for me, Jano. No more fucking around."

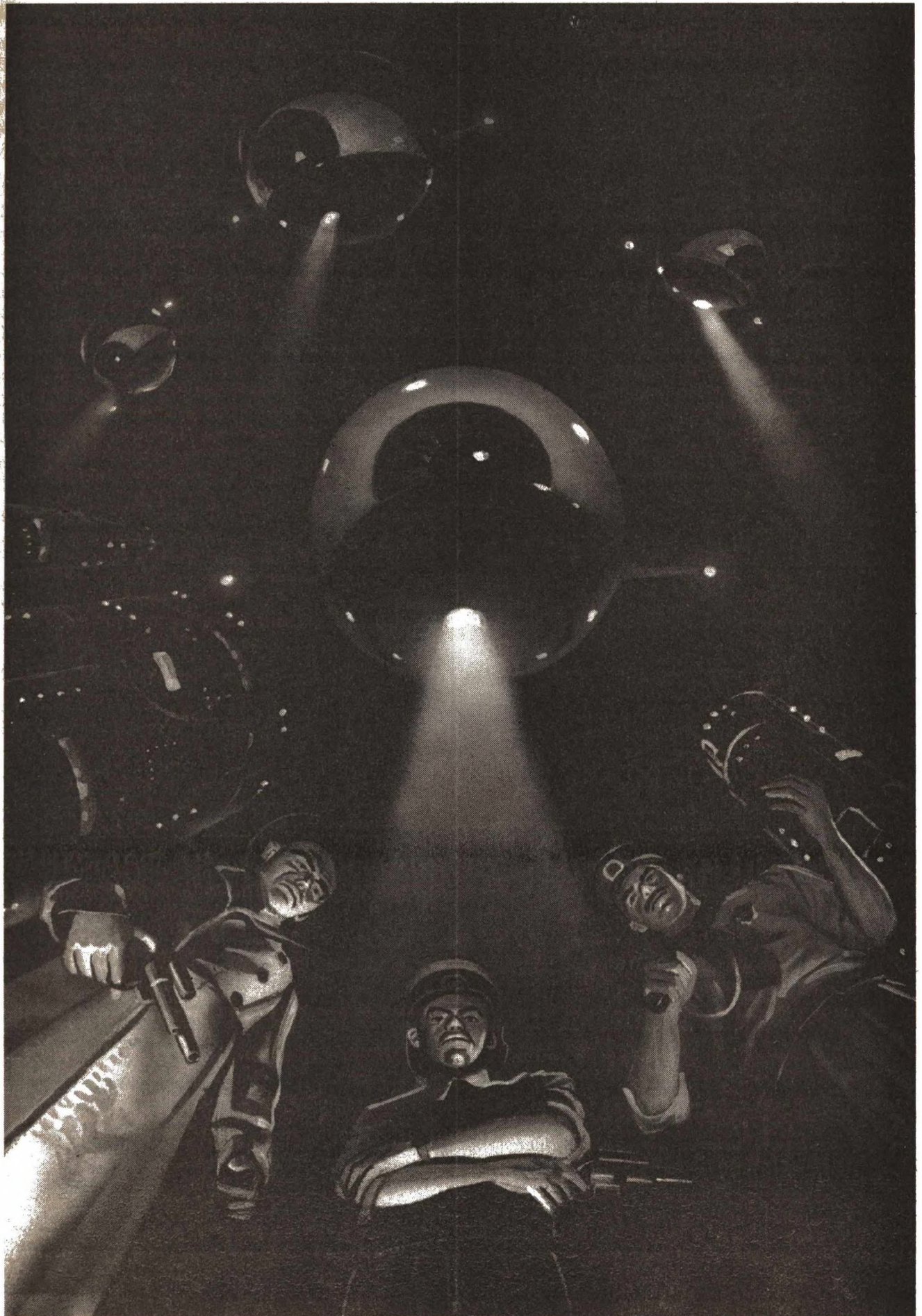
Janocek/Rainchild just smiles, lets the heavy black chain run smoothly down through her fingers, starts it swinging.

The others have spread out now, Sonny and Mud-Pie mixing in with the rest, laughing, waiting.

"It's Rudy, innit?" says the woman. "It 'ad to be Rudy." The chain makes an eerie whirring sound as she starts it circling above her head. I eye its course. It gives her more reach than me, but that's the only advantage she has.

I move first, lunging with my club, faces blurring on either side as the onlookers gasp, shout, lean in toward the action. The tip of my club slices her across the chest, slitting her vest, drawing neat little jewels of blood. My head's a blur of good feelings as I pull back, out of reach, but I keep myself on edge, ready for the counter.

I glance away to draw her and she comes fast, low, chain arcing in towards my skull as the illegal knife I knew she must have swings upward at my stomach. I dodge the knife, let the chain skid across my right temple, setting my head ringing, my sense of balance reeling. She follows up instantly and I dodge, trip her with her own momentum, and follow her down, knee in her back, bones breaking somewhere below me. Hands full of her hair, I twist her head, start beating it on the ground, her blood



smearing the paving slabs, heavy groans escaping her lips each time bare bone meets stone.

She shouldn't have had the knife, I'm thinking, as her body goes suddenly limp and my own body sags, my senses start to blur and all I can see beneath me is Rainchild, still breathing — thank the Lord that she's still breathing! — her head a broken mess, my fingers still knotted in her hair, my body slumping, my breath caught in ragged sobs, and Sonny and Mud-Pie lifting me carefully away from the woman's broken form.

“Why's it got to be like this?” I say, as the three of us ease Rainchild first onto her side and then over onto her back. “What's happening to us? Why can't we just go easy on each other?”

Mud-Pie shrugs, shakes his head. He's a giant of a man, every corner rounded, where mine are all angle and bone. Doesn't say much. “Mister Questions,” he says now, an extension to my name they sometimes use when they don't know how else to handle me. He points at Rainchild's broken head and pats me heavily on the arm, his way of saying *Get the fuck on 'fore she dies, man.*

I touch her skull tentatively. Images of the fight are suddenly vague, as if it never really happened. Like maybe I'm protecting myself from what I've done — I know the feelings from before, but I don't know much more than that — as if my head doesn't want it to have happened so maybe I can forget it out of existence.

I'm not the only one like that. When they'll answer my questions, they'll all admit that something like that happens to them. “It gets the pain away,” Rainchild said once. “Yeah,” I told her. “Maybe that's what's wrong with the world.”

Clearing the blood from her head now, I'm glad there's only Mud-Pie here to see my tears, glad I've sent the others out to crossways five, where I know there are more wounded to tend to. “It's guilt,” I tell him. “Like I'm flooded under all this guilt,” I say. “Only I don't know why.”

Mud-Pie nudges my club with his boot and smiles. “Blooded her good, huh?”

I smile. He's trying to help.

Then I get this blurring at the edge of my perception and I look up and Mud-Pie has it too. I stand, step away from Rainchild.

“Okay, boys, back off,” says the medic unnecessarily. He crouches over Rainchild and aligns some cart arms under her body so she can be lifted up onto his little buggy's trailer. All this through the corners of my sight — I can't look at him directly, can barely bring myself to stay in the same passageway as him. I look away, see that Mud-Pie has swung himself up onto the girder and is holding a hand down to help me up — looking out for the old guy — and I start to move away. Medic doesn't seem to notice me leaving, he's singing a song to himself, something about flowers in an unseasonal rain

storm and how the petals are all falling around on the ground. I don't know the song — don't even remember music until this point — but there's something about the tune and the way the guy is singing it without even getting close to the meaning of the words that makes me want to cry even more than before, when I actually *did* cry.

I nod at Mud-Pie, take his hand, wonder how I could ever explain music to a guy like him. Swing up onto the girder and make for the Barrier.

The Barrier is the end of the world. Ask anybody: that's what they'll tell you. The end, man. Nobody seems to believe that there can be any more than this, that the world doesn't just end where the Dome cuts off.

We're in a side street with dampness hanging in the air and neons flickering from deserted shop fronts, just being there, like how we always finish up.

Past Rito's Caf, partway along the wall of an everyday kind of a house, is the Barrier. It just cuts the street through, like it does countless others. End of the world, man. Looks like plain old red brick, a wall about ten metres high, up to where the Dome-roof takes off and rises high up over us so that you can even get five-storey bunking houses by crossways twelve, which must be near to Dome-centre.

But it's more than just brick.

I've left my small group of comrades, now, as if I'm drawn to it — Sonny, Rainchild, Andrelita, and All-Chins are back outside the charcuterie, still talking, haven't even noticed that I've upped and wandered.

I stop before I reach it, though. Don't want to get any closer. The bricks are shimmering, indistinct, like they've been cut across by some kind of a ... a heat haze over a field of dancing corn, bending the air off into the distance, under a blue, blue ... but it's gone, I don't know what I'm thinking, what I'm seeing. Just a wall, red bricks and mortar all blurred in front of my eyes, making me dizzy when I stare at it for too long like I'm doing right now.

I blink, step back. Don't want to fall over and hit the Barrier. That makes me smile. You touch the Barrier and it's as if all your skin is crawling, trying to pull itself away from your body, but you're stuck to it and you can't pull away no matter how much you want to and then suddenly you can and the crawling sensations stop, but it leaves you feeling sick and shaken and more often than otherwise your legs are hot from your own piss.

“What's past you?” I hiss, staring at the wall because I know it's beaten me back again. I turn to rejoin my friends, and then all the lights flicker like I suddenly remember they've done before.

Rainchild's clutching at Sonny, and the others have gone quiet, but I don't go and join them, I wait.

Nothing more.

Then, just as I've decided to head back and

maybe check the dispensary for food, it happens again. Lights flickering, coming back on, flickering, going out altogether. I look around, and my head's suddenly clearer than I ever remember it having been.

At first I thought it had gone pitch black, but that was only my eyes not adjusted to the new light level. Up over our heads and back towards the centre, the higher parts of the Dome are translucent, and they're letting a dim gray twilight through, and that's why I can still see.

Rainchild is screaming now, and crazily I wonder if it's anything to do with the dim bruising that's appeared on the side of her head — Lord knows how she ever did that to herself. And I catch myself wondering, wondering ... and then I shake my head so I can concentrate, so I don't lose track of my thoughts amongst all this new clarity.

I turn back to the Barrier and it's just a wall. Red bricks, mortar. Rubble and other shit heaped up against it where it joins the road. Rising up to the start of the Dome, ten metres up. Just a wall.

I give a manic whoop and rush at it, momentum carrying me one step, two, up its face before gravity reasserts itself and my toes and fingers scrape against the rough surface and I hit the ground. There's blood on my hands now but who could possibly care? My thoughts skid across to an image of a medic and his electric buggy, bodies on trailers strung out behind, but then the fragment goes and I let it because the Barrier is here, against my face, and it's only red bricks and mortar and it feels dry despite the dampness all around and it's the best feeling I've ever had.

*Shit!* I cry out and my yell echoes around the inside of my skull until centuries later when I hit the ground and it feels as if all my bones have shattered and my skin doesn't fit my body and I move and my legs feel wet and hot and I know the Barrier's woken up again.

**C**rossways eighteen. Rainchild, Mud-Pie, me: just the three of us when the Eyes looked at us in that way and we knew that they were out there, the enemy, the Foe. The street's wide here. Instead of buildings pushing up on all sides, one quadrant is dark, mean-looking, all trees and bushes, lit only by the overspill from the streets on either side.

We could hide in there, but I can't make myself move in that direction, and Rainchild and Mud-Pie aren't even looking that way. I guess it's not meant

to be.

I look around, but there's nothing I can use for a weapon. Iron railings cut the patch of waste-land off from the streets, but any loose rails will have been removed already. Lightning strobes us into ghost-figures of black and white, then thunder sets our flesh shaking seconds later. "Come on," I say. "They could be anywhere."

Mud-Pie grins as if he likes the idea of that, but Rainchild tugs him and the two of them follow me at a slow trot.

Before we reach the next junction I know that it's going to happen. I can feel myself bursting apart, the adrenaline of rage tearing through my blood, cutting my thoughts into the shape of a name. "Ad Sales," I mutter, unable to keep it all in. "Gonna fuck you, Ad Sales."

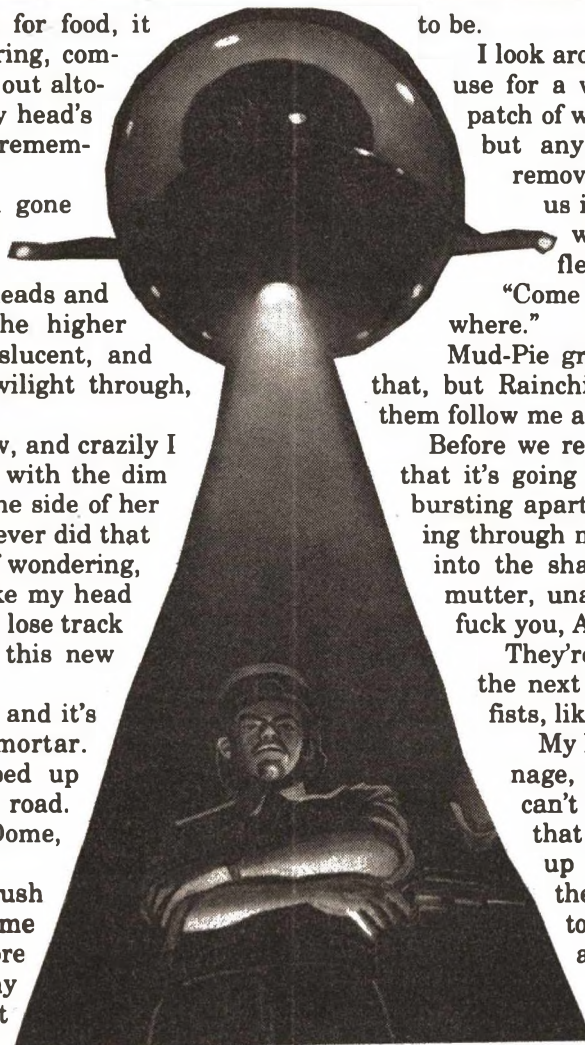
They're already fighting halfway up the next street. Wooden posts, bricks, fists, like some scene from ...

My head whirls. I stare at the carnage, picking out faces, signals I can't even begin to work out, except that I know they're there. Eyes are up on the buildings, focused on the action, one of them turning towards the three of us, the new arrivals.

It starts to click into place. Who's who. Ad Sales are on top, they're smashing our

guys to nothing. I give an almighty scream and tear into the pack, latch onto the nearest Ad I can find, and start mashing his face with my fists, his blood mixing with my own from my torn knuckles as I break through to his jaw-bone, his skull, and then he slumps and my head is almost forcibly turned away from him and suddenly he's gone from my mind until I almost trip over him in my search for someone new.

Next thing I know is teeth loose in my mouth and my face crushed against the rough cobbles of the street. I try to turn, and there's a dull ache in the side of my face from where something has hit me, and then a pain tears through my body from a blow in the ribs. Broken bones grating, I tumble over, try to raise my hands, try to curse the fucking Ad Sales, the only weapon I have left. But that's nothing against the column of wood that expands in my vision so I can see its grain and the nail sticking out until it hits me and my head careens backwards, crashing against stone, and blackness seeps into my shattered vision, clouds my senses. Takes me.



**H**is skin's a kind of a sick brown colour, eyes narrow, lids heavy, folded over on themselves. Hair black, long, tied in three ponytails at the back. Wearing a white cover-all that's smeared with blood and Lord-knows-what-else. He's staring at me. He's a medic, and I don't have to look away, although somewhere in my head I feel that I should.

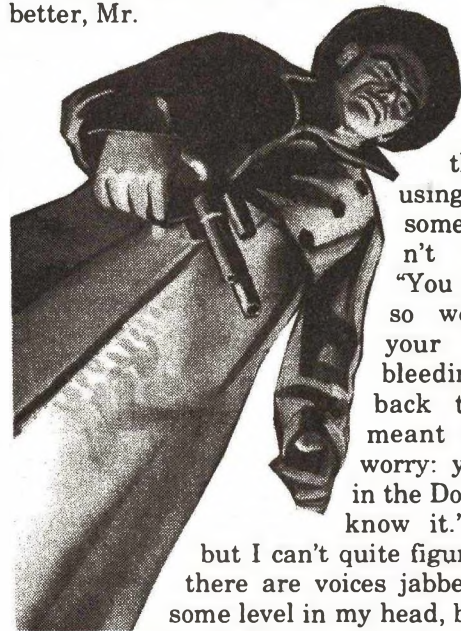
He's smiling, looks easy-natured, comfortable. "We don't get you often, Mr. Pallaster," he says, shaking his head. "You sure caught it this time. Almost didn't get you back."

"Hnh?" is all I can drag out. Feels as if my face is caked in some kind of clay — my jaw will barely move. Scene fades.

Later — I can still remember that first encounter — I open my eyes again and the medic hasn't left, or he's come back or something. He's here anyway. "What's going on?" I manage this time.

I'm in a small room. There are wires attached to me and my face is covered in some kind of clay, or rather, some kind of plastic. I'm on a bunk, my back tilted up so I can see my encased feet, the wires.

"You're going on getting better, Mr.



Pallaster," says the medic. I don't know the name he's using on me, but somehow it doesn't feel wrong. "You got damaged, so we're knitting your bones and bleeding your face back the way it's meant to be. Don't worry: you'll be back in the Dome before you know it." He laughs,

but I can't quite figure it. It's as if there are voices jabbering away at some level in my head, but, no matter how hard I strain, I can't make out what they're saying, not even the shape of their words.

And then the medic's words hit home. "Not in the Dome?" I say, struggling to work out what that could mean. I've always known there's more than the Dome, but, shit, I'm outside of it, outside!

"You don't get out here as often as some of your friends," says Medic. "Otherwise there'd be a ghost memory: you wouldn't know the disjoint." He shakes his head. "You're the real thing, aren't you, Mr. P.? The Real Thing."

He must have seen some kind of confused expression beneath all the plastic on my face because after a second or two he starts up again.

"You created it all, Mr. Pallaster. Don't you remember any of it, not even a ghost memory?" He laughs, shakes his head. "Guess you don't, no. You invented the Dome, you bought up the clone-samples from kids in the city, you built it all. Yeah, that's right: all your comrades are clones. You almost fucked your Commands Implant this last time: we almost couldn't wake you up again."

The voices are in my head again, closer to the surface. I shake my head, set monitors screaming, joining in the cacophony. "Why?" I manage.

"You hire the Dome out to the corporations, they reward their staff with sessions in Control: they work out all their aggressions, channel all their frustrations, reinforce their company patriotism. It really works, Mr. Pallaster, you were a genius."

How could anybody do anything like that? It doesn't make sense. I don't believe him, this strange-looking medic. I *can't* believe him.

"You're wondering how you got in there, aren't you? I can tell."

I don't have the energy to correct him.

"Like I say, Mr. P., you did well. The corporations liked the results — they even screened the Domegames, multiplying their effectiveness. You got beaten by your own success. I'm with Shikuya: my corporation bought your entire operation three years ago."

*Shikuya.* The name, as he said it, sent terrible echoes down through the layers of my mind. It's true, what he's saying. Suddenly I know that it is true.

"You were one almighty fighter, Mr. P. You didn't want to give it up, not one bit. I guess that's why you're so good in the Dome. You cost the corporation dearly in money and in image. You weren't popular by the time you lost out. You'd fought so hard ... I suspect the board thought you might want to go on fighting." He's laughing now, can't stop himself.

I just stare, wait for him to stop.

Finally, he looks at me, says, "You're thinking hard, Mr. Pallaster. I can see when a man's thinking really hard." He stands. "You think all you can about what I've just told you, because when you go back into the Dome it'll all be blanked, like it always is. You forget-the fight and it won't hurt any more — that's what you always said about the clones. So it must be true, hmm? Very humane."

**T**he lights flicker again, and I wake up, and I look at Rainchild, see that she's snuck up to me in the night and now she's resting her head on my lap. She looks good, but I don't feel a thing.

Shit, that's not true.

I look at her face, the way her mouth twitches in sleep, the way her hair curls out along the line of her cheekbones, how her ears are so fleshy in contrast to the lean lines of the rest of her face and her neck. Her neck, the blood pulsing, rapidly, just below the skin. "I'm sorry, Rainchild," I say, trying



not to move, trying not to disturb her. "So sorry."

I don't know why I said that, don't know what makes me sorry. But I know to trust the feeling: it's a ghost from my past, even though past doesn't have much meaning, here in the Dome.

I look at Sonny, at Mud-Pie and at Suggs over in the doorway, and wonder if any of them feel the pain in the same way that I do. But then, why should I be any different to them? I can't find an answer, so I stop thinking about it — my head'll be hurting if I carry on . . . and the day's only just begun.

The others wake, eventually, and we leave the building, wander the streets, relying on chance to lead us to the nearest dispensary for some food and maybe some fresh clothes.

But we don't get there. The senses start to numb, the feelings blur, and a voice in my head starts to churn up the hate, the anger. Eyes are out on the streets, watching us, closing in for the expressions on our faces as the rage takes us over and all we want to do is find someone to smash before someone finds they can smash us.

I look at Rainchild, and she nods. She has a club that she's barbed with metal, only she's not looking directly at it, so she doesn't know it's wrong. Myself, I have a metal rod in one hand, a couple of stones in the other. Sonny and Mud-Pie have wooden clubs. We're all ready. "Let's go," I say, and Mud-Pie smiles his gentleman smile and we set off, one direction as good as another in the search for blood.

Halfway to the next crossway, the lights flicker and a wave of something indescribable passes over me, stops me in my tracks. I drop my rod, wonder what I'm doing, then feel sick as the anger returns. The others have stopped too, but we start again immediately. Nobody says a thing about the lights, the feelings, as if they didn't happen, like they don't fit with our world, with the Dome.

There's a group waiting at the crossway, and I instantly know them as the enemy. There's seven of them and they're well armed, but I know we can't turn away, the Commands in our heads will be too much, and we'll have to go on and fight, our four

## Get Back Issues While They Last

**OUR PREMIERE ISSUES: The supply is limited, which is why we have to charge \$4.50 each for copies of our first issues — they are already collectors' items.**

- Aboriginal No. 1 Orson Scott Card, Hal Clement, John A. Taylor  
Aboriginal No. 2 George Zebrowski, Elizabeth Anne Hull  
Aboriginal No. 3 Connie Willis, Charles L. Grant, Dean Whitlock  
Aboriginal No. 6 Ian Watson, Robert A. Metzger, Emily Devenport  
Aboriginal No. 7 Steven R. Boyett, Patricia Anthony, Rebecca Lee  
Aboriginal No. 8 Kristine K. Rusch, Ray Aldridge, John E. Stith  
Aboriginal No. 9 Ben Bova, Paul A. Gilster, Elaine Radford  
Aboriginal No. 10 Robert A. Metzger, Jamil Nasir  
Aboriginal No. 11 Robert A. Metzger, Phillip C. Jennings  
Aboriginal No. 12 Harlan Ellison, Eliassa Malcohn, Robert Reed  
Aboriginal No. 14 David Brin, B. W. Clough, Robert A. Metzger  
Aboriginal No. 15 Larry Niven, David Brin, Patricia Anthony  
Aboriginal No. 16 Patricia Anthony, Robert A. Metzger  
Aboriginal No. 17 Larry Niven, Walter Jon Williams, Pat Anthony  
Aboriginal No. 18 James Morrow, Phillip C. Jennings  
Aboriginal No. 19 Frederik Pohl, Frank Kelly Freas, Bruce Bethke  
Aboriginal No. 20 David Brin, Frederik Pohl, Frank Kelly Freas  
Aboriginal No. 21 Frederik Pohl, Richard Bowker, Pat Anthony  
Aboriginal No. 22 Mike Resnick, Esther M. Friesner, Sarah Smith  
Aboriginal No. 24 Daniel Keys Moran, Lois Tilton  
Aboriginal No. 26 David Brin, Robert A. Metzger, Joyce Jensen  
Aboriginal No. 27 Harlan Ellison, Lawrence Watt-Evans  
Aboriginal No. 28 *The Interzone* issue. Paul J. McAuley, Greg Egan  
Aboriginal No. 31-32 Gregory Benford, Patricia Anthony, Doug Franklin, Dean Whitlock — *Special double issue for \$5.95*  
Aboriginal No. 33-34 Patricia Anthony, James C. Glass, John W. Randal, Jamil Nasir — *Special double issue for \$5.95*  
Aboriginal No. 35-36 Richard K. Lyon, John W. Randal, Mark Canter, Anthony Lewis — *Special double issue for \$5.95*  
Aboriginal No. 37-38 Patricia Anthony, Chuck Rothman, Howard V. Hendrix — *Special double issue for \$5.95*  
Aboriginal No. 39-40 Patricia Anthony, Alexander Jablokov, Greg Costikyan — *Special double issue for \$5.95*  
Aboriginal No. 41-42 Joe Haldeman, Patricia Anthony, John Betancourt — *Special double issue for \$5.95*  
Aboriginal No. 47-48 David Brin, Chuck Rothman, Robert Reed — *Special double issue for \$5.95*  
Aboriginal No. 49-50 K.D. Wentworth, Karl G. Schlosser, William Barton — *Special double issue for \$5.95*  
Aboriginal No. 51-52 Robert A. Metzger, D. G. Grace, Spencer Luster — *Special double issue for \$5.95*  
Aboriginal No. 53-54 Patricia Anthony, Kristine Kathryn Rusch, Sean Williams — \$5.95  
Aboriginal No. 55-56 Barry B. Longyear, Jack McDevitt, Eric Brown, Michael Sherrod — \$5.95  
Aboriginal No. 57-58 Jeff Janoda, David Riley, Joe Mayhew, Lois M. Gresh — \$5.95

**Act quickly. Send your payment, plus \$1.75 postage and handling for each copy you want, to:**

**Aboriginal Science Fiction  
Back Issues  
P.O. Box 2449  
Woburn, MA 01888**

**Or order all 32 available copies for \$145.00 and save \$22, and we'll pay the postage.**

against their seven. I shake my head, feeling dizzy.  
And the lights fail again.

This time, they stay out. Long enough for my eyes to retrain themselves for the new light-level, for me to hiss, "Calm it! Calm it!" at my three friends.

My head feels clean, fresh, virgin. I look at Rainchild, at Bonny, at Mud-Pie, and I can see it in their eyes, this newness, this clarity. Glance up at the crossway and the seven are milling around, confused, and I sense that we will be safe for as long as the power stays down.

Ghost memories are seeping into my head, and I try to shut a lot of them out, there's too much. But one I hang onto. I focus on it, the image of the Barrier, the last time the power was down for more than an instant.

"Come on," I say, louder now. "The Barrier — let's get out!"

**T**he Barrier is just brick and mortar, except for an instant when the power flickered and the bricks momentarily blurred. But the power stayed down after that, and it's only bricks again.

"What do we do?" I finally say, voicing my thoughts. All I'd known was that we had to get to the Barrier, I hadn't known what followed. "How do we get out, huh? Huh?" I'm looking at Mud-Pie as I speak, but I know he won't answer, he's just a dumb clone like all the others, doesn't even know what *Out* is.

Then there's somebody by my side. I turn and it's Rainchild, looking at me, something in her eyes that I've never seen before. "There's a guy in white," she says. "He comes in on a cart-thing when the fighting's over. I can remember it now ... a kind of shadow of a memory, if you know what I mean." I cry out, hug her for being as human as I already knew she was.

She shrugs, and I can see how hard it is for her to find the words for things she doesn't understand, can't normally even *see*. Silently, I plead with her to continue, and she does. "I know where he gets in and ... *out*."

**T**he doors are wide and polished so your own reflection looks almost more real than *you* do. I stare at the surface, and somehow I know that when the power's up the doors are shielded just like the Barrier. Maybe they're even made invisible, I don't know.

I look at Rainchild and Sonny and Mud-Pie, and at the seven others who have followed us into this building that is split by the Barrier. We're scared, I can see the common thread of that emotion working through each of us, binding us together at some unfathomable level of our souls. I look back at the door. Shit, I can't move, yet I know we can't afford to wait here until the power goes back on and we'll be fighting each other again.

I push at the door, step through, and cautiously, my comrades follow.

And we're outside. Outside the Dome.

A corridor stretches away from us, and I want to get clear of it. There's nowhere for us to hide if the need should arise. I start to run — clamping down on a manic urge to go as fast as I can, to run until I'm ready to drop, until it's all so far behind that it's only a ghost of a ghost of a memory.

I look into the first doorway, smell coffee and smoke. Peer in and see three technicians yammering frantically at faces on screens, using a language I don't understand.

Mud-Pie makes as if to go in and finish them off, but I stop him with a glare and a shake of my head. We have to get clear. We go on past the room, and the next door we try opens out into a roadway, two electric buggies parked nearby. I look up, hoping for blue, but maybe that's not a true ghost memory — the blue — because there's only another ceiling above us, maybe twenty metres up. But the air tastes different out here and suddenly I realize we're free, we've made it. We're outside!

**T**wo streets away we came upon some people — *ordinary people*. There were shops and stalls and these people were talking and walking and haggling over prices. We had slowed to walking pace, and most of them ignored us, but one woman looked up at us, looked closely, and she faltered, threw a hand to her mouth, and backed away into her house. Mud-Pie and one of the others went after her before I could do anything, before I could explain that this is *outside* and we'll be okay. I heard the woman start to scream, but then her voice cut off, and when I looked around, no one on the street seemed to have heard.

I should have known that kind of thing would happen, I should have tried to prepare them for outside. I guess there are lots of things I should have done.

I tried to stop the others, but it was Mud-Pie that set the first example, and now there are eight of them somewhere behind us, causing mayhem, still programmed to survive in the only way they know. To them, I guess, the outside is just like the Dome without the Eyes watching us.

Now there's just the three of us: me, Rainchild, and a dark-skinned youth called Gusto. All we can do is get away as fast as we can. Time, that's what we need. Time for my ghosts to find their flesh again, time for me to remember how the fuck you're supposed to survive in this outside world, time for me to teach my two friends how to live all over again.

We're running down a deserted side street, three abreast, a game of chicken where nobody wants to be the last one out. There! That was another ghost, a memory that must go right back to my childhood, I guess. It brightens me up, makes me think that maybe we have a *chance*. I step up the pace, wonder

how long I can keep it up.

We're at a junction now, but we've stopped. Up ahead there's a large buggy, a van, and standing by it are four men in dark uniforms. The word my mind has dredged up is *police*. I know they must be good — people trust the police, a strange mind-voice tells me — but I'm wary, all the same.

We turn back, find an alley I'd spotted a few minutes earlier.

The alleyway emerges near the junction, but the police and their van are out of sight. "Stay casual," I tell my comrades, as we leave the shelter of a wall. "Nothing to worry us."

But they're still there, near to the junction. When we're clear of the alleyway, they can see us, and then I sense them hurrying in pursuit. I take a casual look over my shoulder and see that they've drawn guns. That's not legal, but then I remember that we're outside now, and it's only in the Dome that we're not allowed anything that can cause too much damage, or that can make the Game too easy.

There's nothing we can do but run. We dodge into another alleyway, shimmy over a wall at one side, and emerge on another deserted street.

We've thrown them off for a moment, but I know it can't last. The police are clever, the voice tells me. And criminals aren't. I block it out, try to think. There's a junction a short distance ahead, we should be able to make it —

And then, as the police round a corner, maybe a hundred metres back, I see the Eye. A shiny black bubble, hanging halfway up a nearby apartment block, it swivels to take in the approaching policemen.

I don't believe what I'm seeing. I ...

I run. Make the next junction as a burst of gunshots echoes along the empty road and Gusto goes down and then Rainchild yells and stops and starts to sob uncontrollably. I don't believe it. I shut the thoughts from my mind and turn the corner into the new street. Swinging round with one hand on a drain-pipe, I catch myself to avoid a stack of rubbish bags, and then I look up and see the wall ahead of me: red bricks and mortar, only its surface is shimmering — a heat-haze in the real Outside and I can sense its patient energy, waiting for me as sounds of the policemen's footfalls get louder and louder, approaching the corner of the street where I am standing. Looking at our new Barrier. □



# *Arisia 1999*

Writer Guest of Honor

**Roger MacBride Allen**

Artist Guest of Honor

**Gary A. Lippincott**

Fan Guests of Honor

**Teresa and Patrick Nielsen Hayden**

January 8 - 10, 1999

The Westin Copley Place, Boston, MA

Membership \$30 until November 15, 1998

ARISIA, Inc., Suite 322, 1 Kendall Square, Cambridge, MA 02139

[info@arisia.org](mailto:info@arisia.org)

<http://www.arisia.org>

# Going with Fergus

By Carroll Brown

Art by Peggy Ranson

**T**hey danced on the spire of the mountain, the clouds hanging beneath them like a bed of ice, whirling and pirouetting in fey time, joining, parting, in a mad manic rhythm. Sometimes his foot slipped on the glass-slick mountainside, but she would change her time, start a new step, so that it looked as if he'd done nothing wrong.

They stopped, and he gasped for breath, half laughing and the other half tearing at the inside of his throat. She stood on tiptoe, frozen, the top of the mountain hovering just under her foot. He always wondered how she did that.

"Are you okay?"

"Just give me a minute. Too old for this sort of thing."

"Never."

He breathed heavily for a minute, watching the sky.

"Let's go home," he said.

She smiled, bending slowly and ever so slightly in the breeze, then fell and skidded over the diamond-packed snow crystals down the hill. He half laughed again, and didn't even try to race her.

*Who will go drive with Fergus now,  
And pierce the deep wood's woven shade,*

**T**his is the dream of the old men, this is the song the mermaids sang, this is the sound of the wind that filled the sails of the ships that journeyed to Byzantium. It began quietly, a whisper, a moan, the little sound of a leaf landing on the water that caused him to look down at the black reflection of the sky in the river that ran by his feet. The river ran silently, inexorable and unquestioning in its constant movement, and the ripples of the leaf's plunge were quickly engulfed and smoothed over as the leaf itself was carried along briefly before sinking, entombed in the flow. The soft deep reflection of the sky stopped quivering and returned to its static darkness.

Around him Ter Erian slept. Balls of light hung like frozen will-o'-the-wisps atop poles, casting patches of brilliance and shadow across the darkened valley floor, striping it as green faded into deep lavender. Farther off, the high fragile minarets of Chulaind's towers poked at the night sky, and the bright pinpricks of stars seemed to hang just above them, looking cool and close in the clear air.

Behind him, Rial hovered in semiconsciousness, and he could hear her gentle movements through the stillness. They had made love that night, and she had clung to him for a long time afterward, her fingers sharp and frightening in his back, before she drifted off into the half-sleep of her people. When she had, he fled to the river's edge, to think.

The water was dark, running almost noiselessly in its narrow path, and no moons hung above him tonight to cast syncopated reflections on its slowly roiling surface. A glimmer here and there, a widely spaced winking, was all that looked back at him.

He never knew what caused him to look up to those widely scattered stars; perhaps some of the People's prescience had rubbed off on him, left the shadow of a tattooed oracle on his soul.

He looked up.

Each star held imperial domains in that sky, a single dot of light surrounded by nations of blackness, looking fierce and terrible and alone out on The Edge. He remembered a sky that burned like a city of light, a teeming metropolis of illumination and fire, the intimidation he felt as one single man beneath a panoply of worlds. But if the filled sky of his memory shrank him, so did this emptiness, and in a way worse; he felt like a soldier whose comrades had been cut down in a sudden charge, and who now stood, with a small and unkempt band, in exile and cut off from home.

A fire lit the sky.

He might not have seen it if he had not been looking up, if his attention had been diverted for a moment by a voice, a sigh, the sound of a leaf hitting the water.

It started like a new star, a tiny flame struggling to twinkle through the clear haze of atmosphere. Had the sky not been black, it would have been lost in the heavenly host. It started just above the rim of the distant mountains on the far side of the valley, small and orange, then slowly rose, seemed to climb higher in the sky, though he knew that, in fact, it fell, that far off it came screaming down from heaven, riding the dragon's breath.

The flame winked out, and the object disappeared for a moment, swallowed up by the dark maw of night. He waited, his breath held tightly in his chest, counting. The sky rumbled.

Seconds later it flew overhead, soundlessly



© Ransom '97

again, a distant silver sparkle diving over the mountains behind him. A red-orange glow shone through the pass briefly, like a false sunrise, and faded. No sound of the crash reached him, and the night returned, quiet and still and dark. He let his breath out slowly, staring at the pass, at the silver glowing mountains, at what lay beyond them.

*And dance upon the level shore?*

It took him all day to reach the high meadow, with its skeletal trees quivering beneath broad olive canopies and the carpet of low golden flowers torn and scattered in a wide furrow down the center, as though a crazed giant ploughman had run amok for one cross of the field, cutting down to the bedrock before being stopped.

At the end of the furrow lay the ship.

He blew the canopy, peering into the cockpit. A dense jungle of wires and tubing filled the cramped space; he reached in, gingerly parting them, ignoring the tingling jolts, and jumped back. An inhuman face glared up at him, eyes elongated and widely spaced, its toothy grimace stretching across the breadth of its visage; it took him several moments to recognize his own features bulged and distorted in the polished convex surface of the pilot's helmet.

He reached in again, his fingers gliding over the shattered controls, found a cracked button, and pushed it. A thin beam of green light rose into the air, visible only as it passed around the dirt and dust hanging over the ship, and he placed his hand in front of the beam. A table of numbers materialized on his palm, the digits slowly fluctuating.

"Damn," he muttered.

He cut the unconscious figure out using the thin blade they had given him long ago; the weapon gleamed and smoked as it sliced through the plastics and metal alloys and tugged toward the flesh visible through the torn uniform. He kept a firm grip on it and pulled the figure free.

Night had covered them before the first signs of life returned to the boy. He had been amazed when he pulled off the helmet, carefully disconnecting the VR links, to discover the youthful figure the equipment had been hiding — a slim, lineless face; full, unruly hair; the thin line of stubble along the jawline and chin that outlined the clear cheeks, the beard of a youth. Next to the boy's, his own features were grizzled and sagging, even with the influence of Ter Erian. All he could do was shake his head at the waste of it all.

There had been no puncture wounds, no broken bones; the only visible damage was the raised discoloration beneath the hairline. Something about the feel of the chest when he carried the boy to the spot beneath the tree, though, a pulpy sensation, and the way several of the ribs seemed to float independently. He had no way of knowing, or of

helping, so he sat patiently, running a damp cloth across the boy's face and squeezing it over his dry lips, waiting for the outcome.

He had stepped out into the scarred field, his eyes scanning the sky for activity as they had almost ceaselessly since he first saw the burning ship fall, when the low moan sounded behind him. He turned slowly, not moving from his position, watching silently as the boy's head lolled from side to side and the eyes opened. He could see them from where he stood, their whites gleaming in the darkness, as they roamed across the landscape, passing over him without stopping, hesitating, then swinging back to lock on him. The boy moaned again, fearfully.

He stayed standing in the meadow, half-hidden by the wan moonlight of the slivered moon, frozen and unsure. He could almost see, already, this world overrun, its nearly void sky filled with the winking fires of orbitals, relays, and navsats, the sudden small novae of the heavy cruisers heading further afield into the constant night of space, to the Edge.

He should kill the boy now. Before the others came looking for him, before they found this place.

The boy moaned again, the wide white eyes never leaving him, and he realized his blade was in his hand, burning with white fire under the moonlight. He never knew he'd drawn it.

He shuddered with the effort of decision.

"Don't worry," he said finally. "I'm a friend."

*Young man, lift up your russet brow,  
And lift your tender eyelids, maid,*

"He could destroy us!" Chulaind slammed his fist on the rail, spinning away from him and stalking inside, into the audience chamber, his robes rippling behind him like the wake of a ship's passing.

He sighed, hesitating on the balcony and looking out over the valley below, across Ter Erian and back toward the high mountains where the setting sun perched. Behind him he could hear the crash and roar of Chulaind's anger, and he waited until the din subsided before following him inside.

"He's just one man," he said evenly.

Chulaind sat slumped at the head chair of the long table. Around him tapestries, once-vivid woven histories of the People that shimmered and changed with each new angle of view, hung tattered and slit; at the foot of one Chulaind had discarded his leaf-bladed sword and now held Gae Bolg loosely in his hand. The spear seemed to glow in the fading light of the chamber.

"Where there is one, there will be more. We both know that," Chulaind said. He smiled briefly. "Trust me, I've seen it before."

"He's just one man," Fergus repeated. "As I was once."

"Ah, but you were different." Chulaind rose, leaning heavily on the spear and throwing out one arm dramatically. "You were Fergus."

"That's just a name you gave me."

"Is it?" Chulaind said simply. "Is it?"

"I don't understand what you're afraid of."

"Afraid of? Him! Them! I tell you, I've seen it before, how many times I can't begin to count. First they took the island, then the planet, then another . . . Always we are one step away, and always they take that step, driving us further back. Oh, for a time we can live together, close enough to touch. But there's never enough room for them."

"Then fight them."

"Don't you think I would if I could? If it would make a difference? Don't you think when the first man set his foot on the shores of Eire I would not have thrust this through him, and smiled!" Chulaind's voice had risen to a shriek, and he spun, throwing Gae Bolg across the great hall. It flew like lightning, embedding itself halfway up its shaft in the stone of the wall, and stuck there, quivering. Fergus watched it until its vibrations were no longer discernible, and when he turned back Chulaind had sunk once more into the chair.

"What would you have me do?" Fergus said. "He's a boy. He's hurt. I'll do whatever you ask."

But Chulaind simply smiled, a smile that Fergus had seen innumerable times and still failed to fathom. "I leave him to you," he said. "Do what you must."

Rial was waiting for him outside the audience chamber, and she had to dash to catch up with him as he stalked quickly past her.

"What did he say?" she gasped out, her diaphanous gown billowing like wings behind her as she trotted beside him.

"Nothing," he said. "We're to let him be for now."

"That's good, isn't it?" she asked innocently. "He's human, like you."

He just grunted, and kept walking.

He gathered supplies quickly from their home, stuffing what they could spare into a cloth bag and slinging it over one shoulder.

"You're going back now?" Rial asked, still fluttering around him excitedly.

"I promised him," he said. "He needs food, and he's still hurt."

"Can I come with you? I wish to see him."

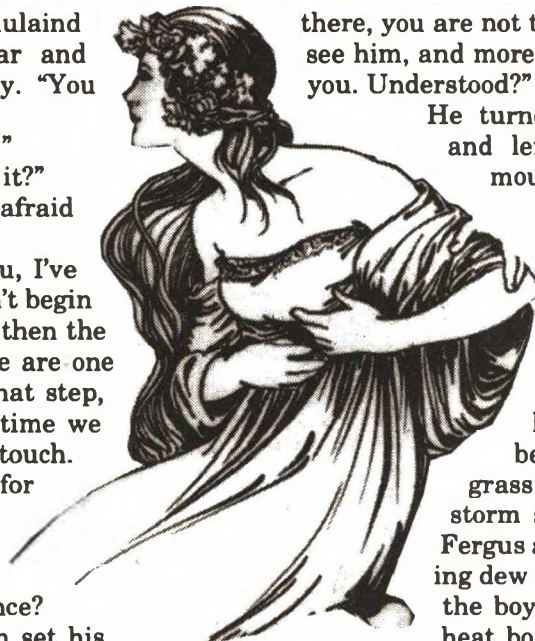
For one moment Fergus had a thought, a terrible vision, and he chewed his lip in deliberation, then spun on her quickly. She danced back as the bag swung past her face.

"No," he said strongly. "You are not to go up

there, you are not to follow me, you are not to see him, and more important he is not to see you. Understood?"

He turned without another word and left, climbing back up the mountain as she watched him.

*And brood on hopes  
and fears no more*



The boy had dragged himself more than halfway back to his ship before collapsing in the grass. His face, the color of a storm sky, was damp with what Fergus at first took to be the morning dew until he ran his hand down the boy's cheek and felt the deep heat boiling beneath the skin. He

lifted him as gently as he could and laid him back in the shadows of the covering trees.

The eyelids beat feebly for a moment, then, with an effort, stayed open, and the boy's painclouded gaze touched on him. As with the night before, the eyes spun wildly across the landscape and always came back to him, as though anchored. Pleading.

He wanted to strike the boy, slap him hard across the face for the foolishness that might have killed him. He understood youthful heroism and had no patience with it. The anger was fueled by fear and knowledge; he knew what drove the boy to the suicidal effort, what he had been seeking as he dragged himself over the hard earth on the bones of his broken chest.

Chulaind was right. They were relentless; there would be others, unless he could change it. He modulated his voice, kept it clear of emotion.

"What the hell do you think you were doing? You could have killed yourself."

The boy nodded weakly, but didn't answer right away. His lips moved but did little more than shape the thin hiss of air he managed to dredge up from his battered lungs. A bubble of blood came with it.

"Don't talk," Fergus said.

The boy ignored him. "Beacon!" he cried out, springing up with the effort of the word as it exploded from him, shouted on a spray of blood as he collapsed backward and his eyes rolled up in their sockets. Fergus knelt quickly, felt his neck and wrist, and watched the erratic but insistent rise and fall of his chest.

He knew that was what the boy had been after: the homing beacon. The small pulse-generator that would alert anyone listening to its frequency of its, and by extension its pilot's, whereabouts. He'd found it in the cockpit when he first removed the

boy, still in place, still unactivated. Had he considered himself still an officer he would have commended the boy for bravery and slapped him for idiocy in the same move. Typical young hotshot, Fergus thought, who didn't have the sense to activate it the minute he knew he was going in, who thought he might miraculously save himself and his craft, and now it was too late.

He patted his pocket, pulled the beacon out, feeling the small irregular bulk of it in the palm of his hand, and quickly, with a grunt and an audible click from his aging shoulder, tossed it as far as he could into the tangled underbrush beneath the canopy of trees.

And immediately felt guilty. The boy was simply trying to do the right thing as he saw it: to save himself, to further his side's cause. And Fergus simply had to convince him that he was wrong, that there were other goals, and other things worth protecting. Didn't the boy deserve the chance to choose? Could Fergus take that chance?

He wrestled with that, pacing and cursing to himself, until evening fell.

Perhaps the cooling of the air, the almost visible shimmering of the sky as the sun fell below the mountaintops and the thick blanket of the night sky at The Edge, the nearly unbroken blackness, was pulled up from the far horizon, touched something in the boy. With the last ray of sunlight sliding away he opened his eyes. Fergus chose to take it as a hopeful sign; the People were also called the People of the Twilight.

"Where ..."

"Don't worry, you're among friends," he said, then quickly corrected himself. "Friend. I'm a friend."

The boy stared at him a long time, as if trying to recognize his face, place him in his past somewhere. "I pulled you out, patched you up. As well as I could. You should've got out of there."

"I thought I could save her." The boy's eyes travelled to the shadowed, half-buried hulk of his ship, a faintly glinting tangle of metal in the rising moonlight.

"I know," Fergus muttered. The boy didn't hear him. "How do you feel?"

"It hurts."

"Well, I hate to tell you this, but there's something busted up inside of you, and I can't do anything about it. I'm not a doctor or anything," Fergus said. The pain was bringing tears to the boy's eyes, and Fergus wished he'd pass out again. At least it hid him from the suffering. "I don't know if it's anything vital. All we can do is wait. I'll wait with you."

"Wait to see if I die." The boy spoke it as a statement, without emotion.

"Yes," was all Fergus could say.

They sat in silence for a long while then, the boy staring out across the meadow with its grass

waving in silver ripples. Several times Fergus thought he'd fallen asleep again, though the moonlight shone in his eyes, on the trail of tears down his cheeks. Only the thin wind of his breath told Fergus that he hadn't died with his eyes open and the tears of pain still flowing.

"I need to ask you something," the boy finally said. "I need you to get something for me."

"The beacon."

The boy's head snapped around toward him, followed quickly by a grimace of pain. "How —"

"You asked for it when you were out, kept talking about it," Fergus said. "It's not there. It's gone."

"Are you sure? It's a rough cylinder, about eight centimeters . . ."

"I know what they look like," Fergus snapped, then said more calmly, "I used to be a pilot myself."

"How'd you end up here, in the middle of nowhere?"

"I didn't," Fergus said. "It's a long story."

Above them the black line of coming night passed over and down, drawing the moon behind it to light the otherwise empty sky. From where they sat, beneath the solid canopy of leaves between the spires of the looming mountains, no stars could be seen. Only the moon moved above them, around them, tumbling with relish in its barren path.

He realized the boy was weeping again, small sounds in the still of the night.

"Pain?"

"This place," the boy said. "What a place. No stars. Ever since I was a kid, I wanted to join the Corps. To be in space, to travel up there, fight, see a thousand worlds. All the kinds of things they put in slogans." He swallowed hard, trying, Fergus thought, to smile through it. To be a man. "I don't want to die under a sky with no stars."

"There are stars. You just can't see them," Fergus replied, but he knew that wasn't really what he meant, that it hadn't come out the way he'd intended. "Maybe you won't die," he added weakly.

*And no more turn aside and brood  
Upon Love's bitter mystery;*

The boy slept finally, drifting away from the pain and fear into dreams that twisted his face and caught his breath short, released it in ragged gasps. Occasionally blood accompanied it, leaving thin lines, black in the night, that trailed down his chin and from the corners of his open mouth.

Fergus left him propped against the tree, spouting blood and dream-bred cries of anguish, looking like a puppeteer's nightmare.

He had barely settled himself in the far copse, hunkered behind a natural hedge of sharp-leaved bushes, when he saw her glow at the top of the pass. The moon had passed over the mountains,



and hers, faint as it was, was the only light in the high meadow. She stood out like a star.

He had known Rial would follow him, eventually. It was in her nature, in their nature, a curiosity and something stronger. A drawing together, a bond that stretched and snapped them together, always, humans and faeries. And he knew her, knew his insistence that she stay away would only fan that natural ember of inquisitive desire. It was what had drawn her to him in the first place.

She passed by the ship without seeming to notice it, lightly stepping over the wide, ragged furrow and coming to a delicate halt. A wind that he could not feel moved and shifted her light robes, spreading them like wings around her. He heard the boy's breath as it was sucked in, and he trembled, as he had the night that she came to him when he had lain dying beside a ruined ship.

He'd brought his ship in fast and too steep, punching the window instead of sliding through it, and the ship cracked and screamed as it fell flaming from the sky of a world he'd never seen before. That no one had seen, out beyond the edge of explored space, where the fighting had not yet reached.

He'd walked away without a scratch.

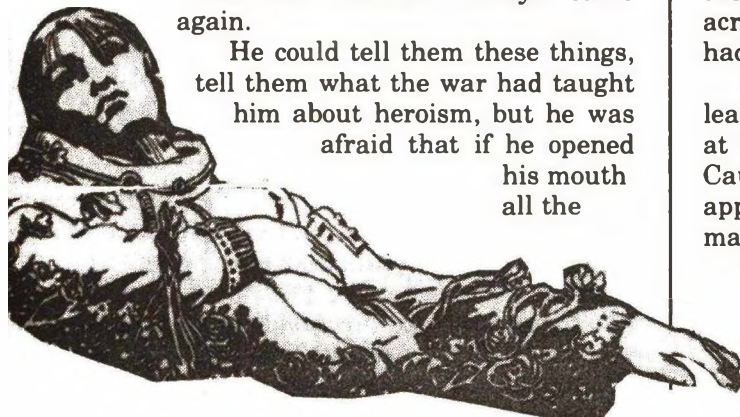
He wasn't sure if that had been a good thing or not. Had he wanted to die? Had some part of him tried to end his life as he had ended so many others, in a moment of chaos eliding into entropy? No. He'd given no thought to the end of his journey; only the imperative of flight had driven him.

They'd pinned another medal on him, shaken his hand and patted his back and sung the praises of the hero and his conquests. They toasted him, fêted him, fed him, and called for speeches, to hear the stories from his own lips.

He had no words for them, nothing to say that they wanted to hear. They never mentioned, in their many retellings, the sound of fire in the night sky of a planet far from home; the sudden burst of static on the radio that was the only sound of victory in a battle in space; the vast emptiness, always. He'd learned to cringe at all of these, to duck his head and close his eyes until the moment passed.

But the moment always came again.

He could tell them these things, tell them what the war had taught him about heroism, but he was afraid that if he opened his mouth all the



voices of all the ghosts inside him would come out in one great cacophonous shriek of memory.

He had looked around him, at the bobbing sea of young faces tilted up toward him with anticipation, and he had turned and walked away. Out of the hall, out of the city, into a ship. Away.

And had fallen on fire on that distant place, and walked away from the tangled metal into a forest of thin creatures, tall and rooted in the sandy soil, whose cilia waved and floated in the breeze as though beckoning him deeper into their midst. He'd accepted, let their hair-thin tendrils brush over him as he walked among them, and finally had sat, his back against a rock, and closed his eyes to die. The thin whistle of the whipping cilia lulled him.

He never knew how long it had been until she came, but long enough that starvation, had he chosen to pay attention to it, had racked his innards and thirst had clogged his throat and mind with an encroaching dusty death. And then she was there, a flitting shadow under the low sun, making her way toward him. He didn't have the strength to be afraid. She touched his face, and the skin of her fingertips was delicate and soft as a child's tear. He wanted to cry out, to scream, to weep because she was an angel so he knew he was dead.

She had taken his hand, helped him stand, and led him, smiling, through the whistling forest to Ter Erian as it had been in that place, on that world, so many years ago. He wasn't sure when he realized he wasn't dead or dying anymore.

And there, now, in the moonlight in the high meadow, Rial reaching out slowly, touching the boy's face. They spoke, but he was too far away to hear and the words came to him only as murmur, a soft sound. He turned away, unable to watch any longer, and crept off among the high-canopied trees, wondering what he had done.

*For Fergus rules the brazen cars,*

He returned the next night, stepping out of the underbrush looking wild and exhausted. He hadn't slept, or returned to Ter Erian; instead he'd climbed to the spire of the mountain and sat, letting the icy winds burn across his face, scrape his cheeks clean of tears. It had taken more than a day.

The boy stood beside the wreckage of his ship, leaning on a stick that he occasionally used to poke at a tumble of wires or pile of twisted metal. Caught in his thoughts, he didn't hear Fergus approach and gave a startled jolt when the older man stepped out of the shadow of the debris.

"You're up," was all Fergus said.

The boy nodded nervously then, drawing a line from the broken ship to the sky over them with his eyes, and added with a forced laugh, "Not high enough."

"Well, you're not going any place in her," Fergus agreed. "Fortunately there are things that make staying here worthwhile."

The boy's face glowed even in the darkness, embarrassment flushing his features, and Fergus turned away quickly at the sudden welling of the pain inside. He didn't want to frighten the boy.

"You called it 'her,'" the boy said from behind him, and Fergus turned back, but only as far as the ship, still not wanting the boy to see his face, the expression he couldn't control. "You talk like a flyer."

"I was," said Fergus. "I told you that last night."

"I'm sorry," the boy said apologetically, and Fergus realized he had spoken almost venomously. "I don't remember . . . most of last night."

"Good," muttered Fergus, but he knew by the pause and the continued blush that he remembered the important parts.

"How did you come to be here?"

"Same as you," said Fergus. Too much the same.

"You crashed here?"

"Not here, no."

"I don't understand."

"I crashed, yes, but somewhere else. Some people found me. I've been with them since. We've had to move a few times. Ended up here."

"What about your beacon?"

"Same as you," Fergus repeated. I threw it away, like I did yours. But the boy was grinning at him, and Fergus flinched as something flew at him through the darkness, grappling blindly for it and grunting as it hit him in the chest, dropped into his cupped hands.

A metal cylinder.

He looked up at the boy quickly. "Where did you find this?" he asked.

"I didn't. She did."

Rial. He should have guessed, have foreseen it. The boy lamenting the beacon's loss and Rial, ever eager to please and not knowing. It would have taken her moments to find it, as long as it would take her to walk to it as it lay in the deep grass under the trees.

"I thought she was a dream at first," the boy was saying. "I thought I was dying and was starting to see things. Angels. Then she touched me." Living the memory, he gingerly placed a hand to his own chest, pressed gently, and didn't flinch from pain the way he had a day before. He looked at Fergus. "What is she? Do you know? Is she an angel?"

"No," Fergus said. "Not quite. Something more earthbound than that."

"Is she one of the people you've been living with?"

"Yes," said Fergus. "She is."

The boy watched him for a long moment, until his grin returned, widening and cutting across his

face as his teeth shone through parted lips.

"You can go home now," he said, pointing to the beacon in Fergus's hand.

"I don't want to."

The boy rocked backward as if Fergus's words had been a fist thrown at his face. The tip of his stick scabbled in the dirt for a purchase to hold him steady.

"But you're a flyer," was the only argument he could muster.

"Yes, I was. So what?" Fergus said.

"That's treason."

Fergus shrugged. "I've been gone a long time. They've probably forgotten about me."

The boy stood frozen, rooted by indecision and confusion and, Fergus thought, the conviction of youth. He could almost see each argument enter the boy's mind, undergo scrutiny, get tossed aside as the boy studied him, tried to understand him.

"You're crazy."

"Maybe," said Fergus.

Disbelief came out as a harsh laugh that trailed off and withered away. "Please," the boy said. "Come with me."

He'd thought the boy meant to take his place, to send the old man back and assume his position among the People. That argument was easily won; his foolish hope crumbled.

Fergus held the beacon out, his hand trembling. "If you use this, they'll come looking for you. Here. They'll find this place." He could throw it, but the boy would find it again, or Rial would. He could crush it, smash it on the rocks, take it to the spire of the mountain and throw it into the valley.

He extended it toward the boy.

The boy took the cylinder, reaching out slowly but then snatching it from Fergus's hand, as if afraid that he might jerk it away at the last moment. He clutched it guiltily, staring down at it as it lay in his palm.

"If they come here," said Fergus, "they'll use this place. We both know that. They'll take it."

"We need it," the boy said. He didn't look up, didn't look at Fergus. "It's not going well. We need every base we can find."

"They don't have to find this one."

The boy was almost in tears, his breath the quick pant that precedes a sob. "I have a duty," he said. He raised the beacon toward the sky.

Fergus hit him once, in the face. Not hard; he pulled it as his fist made contact, struck just hard enough to stun the boy. The boy's arm dropped, fell to his side though he still grasped the cylinder, and before he could react Fergus grabbed him roughly by the back of the neck, half dragging him across the high meadow to the edge of the pass.

Below, in the valley, the lights of Ter Erian could be seen. Just pinpoints from this distance, it seemed as if they were looking down on a sky full of stars, the shining distant globes twinkling at

them and calling them down from the mountain.

"That place," Fergus said. "She's down there. She's waiting for you. It's like heaven." The boy tried to pull away, jerking in his grasp, but Fergus held him, turned his head toward the valley, forcing him to see it. "Look, damn you! If you're going to destroy it, look at it first! Understand what you're doing."

The boy stopped struggling, mesmerized by the display below him, the pageantry of illumination that stretched across the valley floor, dancing and twisting like a glowing sea now as more and more light flooded Ter Erian. Fergus stepped backward away from him, letting the boy revel in it.

He wasn't sure how long they stood there, staring down the gap in the mountains at the swirling radiance, letting the boy fill with wonder.

"Who are they?" The boy finally broke the trance, shuddering as he gently pulled the tendrils of Ter Erian from his soul.

"They've had a lot of names. Tuatha de Danaan. Faeries. People of the Twilight. Depends which myths you listen to and which legends you read. It's funny, they just call themselves the People. They call us the Outsiders, the Late-comers."

The boy fell still again, still staring down. I gave her up for you! Fergus screamed silently at his back. I let her go to save this place! You can't make that mean nothing. His full concentration bored into the boy's back, he could feel it like a physical emanation from his forehead, but the boy simply stood enraptured, not noticing.

"She's down there," Fergus repeated.

"Don't make me do this," the boy said.

Just barely, and only because he knew to look for it, Fergus could see the faint outline of Chulaind's tower away in the distance, its walls reflecting the shine of the valley between him and it.

"You have to make a choice. It's us or them."

"Isn't there anyway to live together?" he asked.

"No," answered Fergus. "There never has been."

The boy nodded, understanding finally. "I'm sorry," he said. He raised the beacon again, releasing its safety with a quick, practiced movement, his thumb hovering over the plunger as he pointed it toward the starless sky.

"So am I," Fergus said. He drew his blade across the boy's throat, in one quick motion, hoping he never felt it.

*And rules the shadows of the wood,*

"I thought he would be like me," Fergus said. "I thought, given the choice ..."  
He stood on the balcony overlooking Ter Erian. Chulaind stood beside him, his fingertips resting lightly on the stone railing, seeming lost in thought as he watched the last light of day leak down from the mountaintops to the village below

as the sun set behind them.

"And?"  
he finally said.

"I was wrong."

Chulaind simply nodded, understanding, and turned from the balcony's edge toward the chamber behind it. Fergus didn't follow, and Chulaind stopped beneath the arch, spoke without looking back.

"They'll come anyway, you know," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"You've simply delayed things, not stopped them. I told you, but you weren't listening. They just keep coming, and there's nothing you can do about it."

"We could fight them. I would fight them with you, I would fight for that."

"You're still not listening. It only delays things. In the end, they'll reach this place, and we'll move on to the next. The same old dance, one step away."

"And when there's no place else to go? They already have you backed to The Edge."

"We'll step into the Void," Chulaind said. Fergus turned toward him, and he was wearing that smile that Fergus never understood until now, the bittersweet smile of someone who knows how a sad play ends but has to sit through it anyway. "And then," he added, with a voice whose sudden contempt surprised Fergus, "they'll know what they've lost."

Chulaind disappeared into the darkening chamber, the torches not yet lit as evening fell, and Fergus turned slowly back toward the valley, watching the frozen will-o'-the-wisps flame up one by one in a dizzying pattern across the valley floor. He thought of the valley in darkness, of Rial, and of the boy.

He sighed, and his breath was the wind that filled the sails of the ships that journeyed to Byzantium.

*And the white breast of the dim sea  
And all dishevelled wandering stars.*

— William Butler Yeats  
"Who Goes With Fergus"

### Visit Aboriginal on the Web

Aboriginal Science Fiction now has a web presence. Visit us at:

<http://www.aboriginalsf.com>  
and tell us how you like it.

# The E-Ticket

By J. Brooke

Art by Larry Blamire

“One E-ticket,” said the Arcturian. “I wish to see *all* of Los Angeles.”  
“That’s fourteen bucks. And one makes *fifteen*, and five makes *twenny*. Thank you, sir and EN-joy your tour of L.A., smog *Cap-ital* of the *You-nited* States!”

The Arcturian proudly grasped a buff-colored ticket in one of its claws and slithered through the turnstile to join the rest of the tour group.

“If you’ll all gather round, please, we can start.” The tour guide counted heads, checking to see if any of the creatures had wandered off; he was fifteen years old and sported wraparound sunglasses, a flattop haircut, and a T-shirt that read **FUCK YOU, ASSHOLE**. “My name is Rahim,” he said, “and I’m your guide to the wonderful world of Los Angeles!”

All of the creatures in the tour group chattered excitedly as they gathered close.

“I am an authentic gang member,” the tour guide recited. “Notice my red handkerchief, which signifies membership in the Bloods.”

Several of the creatures in the group had taken out cameras; flash bulbs now flickered.

“Behind me, you will notice our first attraction, an authentic Mexican homeboy.”

The Arcturian turned, its claws clicking with excitement. The Denebian, a vast gelatinous immensity, also turned. In fact all the creatures in the tour group did an about-face at the approach of a lowrider with a red bandanna around his head and an extremely large boom box on his shoulder.

The lowrider glared at them. He switched the boom box volume control to 9, its highest setting, then punched the **LOUDNESS** button. “Hey! *Ese!* Watch you be doin’, homes? Huh? What it **IS**?”

“Will we be mugged?” the Arcturian asked. Its cilia were waving with delight.

“Yo, come back here, I **TALKIN’** at you, homes!”

“O, wonderful!” cried the Arcturian. “Does he have a switchblade? Will he attempt to extort money from us?”

At this all the creatures in the tour group hopped up and down excitedly and swung their cameras toward the lowrider. All except the Rigellians, that is: like a pair of sullen oversized caterpillars, they hung back chattering and squeaking to one another in phrases that their translator units stubbornly refused to turn into English. Finally, just as the lowrider snapped open a wicked-looking switchblade, one of the Rigellians spoke up.

“This human’s speech inflections indicate he is not native to the Latino cultural bloc. You defraud us! We demand *real* lowriders, not fakes!”

The boy with the boom box stared at the ground sheepishly and blushed. To make matters worse, the entire tour group distinctly heard him mutter *Shucks*.

“Muggings, muggings,” cried all the creatures in the tour group. “We want muggings! Graffiti! Flashers!”

“It’s true that Ralph here is only a part-time street gang member at the moment, while he’s working as part our tour staff,” Rahim said quickly, herding the tour group toward the bus. “But I’m sure Ralph plans to change his name to Hector and become a full-time delinquent as soon as he finishes ... medical school. Now if you’ll follow me, we’ll be seeing a *real* robbery any moment —”

“You defraud us!” squeaked the Rigellians. “We want actual lowriders! We wish to see stereos removed from cars! We wish to see freeway shootings!”

All of the creatures in the group began to chant **WATTS, WATTS, WE WANT WATTS**, until Rahim quieted them down and herded them on board the tour bus. The doors swung shut; with a hiss of air brakes, the vehicle rumbled off toward South Central L.A.

“Where is the smog?” demanded the Rigellians. “Your travel brochure promises smog. We wish to see opaque brown air!”

**SMOG**, the rest of the creatures chanted, **WE WANT SMOG**.

Rahim hastily pointed out the window of the bus. “Over there! Look! Smog, see?”

“No, no,” objected a starfish-like organism from galaxy M-31. “That is not smog. Spectral absorption lines indicate smoke from a brush fire, not sulfur dioxide.”

“This is a bad day,” Rahim mumbled. “The inversion layer must have lifted ...”

“Fraud!” the Rigellians squeaked. “We demand nitrogen oxides! We demand ozone! We demand dangerous levels of particulates!”

“Look,” Rahim interrupted. “Here’s something *better* than smog. We’re now in South Central, and directly in front of us is the graffiti and vandalism capital of Los Angeles!”



All of the creatures stared out of the tour bus windows at the suspiciously clean streets.

"I see no graffiti," the Arcturians objected.

"I see no vandalism," chirped the Rigellians.

"What? Move over."

Rahim shouldered his way to the nearest window. His eyes bulged, and sweat broke out on his forehead.

"Uh, there was graffiti on that underpass last week ..."

Realizing that the situation called for quick action, Rahim motioned for the driver to stop the tour bus in the middle of the street.

"Everyone out," Rahim yelled, "we're going to see a peep show!"

The creatures did as they were told, albeit with peevish and apparently untranslatable squeaks and grumbles.

"This way. Everyone follow me. The peep show is located in an X-rated bookstore around the corner."

Rahim led the squad of scuttling creatures past a pizza parlor, a Mexican restaurant, and finally to a dead stop directly in front of a boarded-up storefront. He stared up at the plywood-covered windows. "I'm telling you, there *was* a pornographic book store right here. I took a party of Sirians to see it last week. And there were four-letter words *all over* that underpass right there —"

The creatures in the tour group exchanged a storm of untranslatable clicks and shrills. Finally, the Arcturian rose to its full eight-foot height and snapped its claws under the tour guide's nose.

"We demand the return of all technologies we have given your species. This is fraud! The brochures promised robberies, indecent exposure, graffiti, garbage in the streets!"

"Yes, yes!" squeaked the Rigellians. "Garbage in the streets! Air pollution! All those exotic cultural elements unique to your planet!"

Rahim did his best to calm the group. "Wait a minute, let me get my bearings. Maybe the graffiti was on the next block over —"

"We demand refunds," the Arcturian snapped. "This tour was sold to us under false pretenses."

"Yes, yes," added the Rigellians, "this is fraud. We have given you antigravity, faster-than-light travel, and immortality. And in return, what did we ask? We wished merely to tour Los Angeles, a city which is familiar to the entire galaxy from your television emissions. We desired to observe your delightfully unique social institutions, such as riots and freeway shootings. The group from Andromeda told us they did not see a single freeway shooting last week. Not one!"

The Arcturian produced an elaborate device from its carapace, a mechanism vaguely reminis-

cent of a toaster. The Arcturian manipulated the extraterrestrial appliance, and in an instant a vast shadow fell over the street.

Rahim winced. A mile-long spaceship now hovered barely a hundred meters above the streets of South Central L.A.

"We are leaving," declared the Arcturian, "and we will tell *all* the species in our star cluster to *avoid* your planet."

"Yes, yes," chirped the Rigellians, "we also depart. No species in the galaxy will visit your planet! We will tell them how you defraud your customers!"

From the direction of the tour bus the group heard a peculiar sound. Everyone turned.

The sound was that of the bus driver clearing his throat.

"If I may," he interrupted. "I'm sure I can sort this out."

The Rigellians wriggled their tentacles impatiently. "We leave! We demand refunds! Give us back our immortality serums and star drives and antigravity engines!"

"Wait," the bus driver begged. "This is all a *terrible* misunderstanding. Let Rahim and me see if we can work this out."

The creatures in the tour group chattered and squeaked among themselves: finally, the Arcturian answered for the group.

"We wait five minutes. Then we demand satisfaction. We have come seven thousand light years, and there is not even garbage in the streets!"

"I'll take care of everything," promised the bus driver in a soothing voice. "Just let me talk to Rahim for a minute."

With a savage gesture he motioned the luckless wight into the bus and levered shut the pneumatic door.

Once inside, Rahim was fixed with a merciless stare. "What the hell is *wrong* with you? Do you know how *important* these tours are? The last time I went through L.A. I needed a *platoon* of goddamn Secret Service agents to keep from getting mugged. What in hell's going on?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. President. All these tours, they've ruined the city."

"Goddamit, you don't even *talk* like a Blood anymore. Use some F-words!"

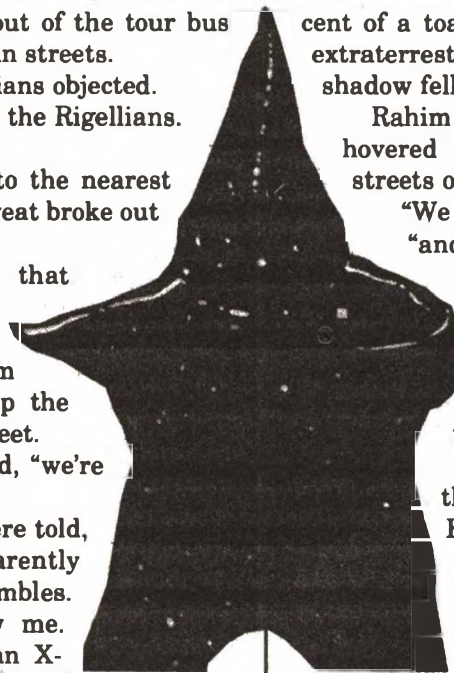
Rahim couldn't meet the President's eyes. Head hanging, he mumbled an incoherent reply.

"What? Speak up!"

"I said it's just no more fun."

"No more *fun*? What the hell are you *talking* about?"

"It's not just me, Mr. President. *Everyone* in L.A. feels the same way. When you designated the city



an amusement park and started the tours, well, all the flashers and car thieves and muggers started getting *applause*."

"So?"

"I guess it took the thrill out of it," Rahim offered helplessly. "The hookers all got married. The pimps gave up and became computer programmers."

"Jesus H. Christ! Computer programmers? That's *sick!*" the President shouted.

"And then the Bloods and the Crips found out these creatures actually *wanted* them to shoot each other and sell crack. So they, well, they sort of ..."

"They sort of *what?*"

"— volunteered for the blood drive."

"Blood drive?" the President whispered. He was sweating, and he looked unnaturally pale.

"And for the muscular dystrophy association fund drive too," Rahim added. "Even the flashers have stopped flashing. Why bother? What's the point, when everyone *wants* them to do it? I could see the end coming, Mr. President, when some ten-year-olds stole sandblasting equipment last week."

"Well, that's a start. At least they were *stealing* something, for God's sake."

"That was what I thought, till they sandblasted away all the graffiti on the Ventura off-ramp. And then they enrolled in art classes. I guess it just wasn't *fun* being a juvenile delinquent any more."

"This is *evil*," the President hissed. "This is *immoral*, by God, and I won't have it!"

Rahim sighed. "After the hookers and the gangs moved out, the porno bookstores and head shops closed up. That was last month; just this week, the winos organized a Clean-Up-the-City Day. The tour business has been going downhill ever since. People are car pooling. They don't even *litter* any more."

The President stared at him, speechless.

"And I've been taking evening classes at ITT Technical Institute, in the evenings," Rahim admitted.

At this, the President turned an apoplectic shade of red.

"You're fired," the President yelled. "Gimme your badge and get out of my way!"

Without waiting to receive the item in question, the President ripped the TOUR GUIDE brassard from Rahim's sweatshirt and stormed out of the bus. "Okay, listen up," he shouted to the group of wriggling creatures. "Our itinerary has changed. Instead of Los Angeles, we're going on a tour of Washington D.C.!"

"But the brochure specifically advertised Watts —"

"To hell with Watts. You're going to see the Pentagon!"

"Will we observe actual weapons procurement?" chirped the Rigellians excitedly. "Will we see genuine kickbacks?"

"I don't know the answer to that specific question. To the best of my knowledge I'm not aware of any malfeasance in that particular area."

"Listen!" squeaked the Rigellians. "Denials of wrongdoing! It is just as in the televised hearings that are famous throughout the galaxy."

"Speaking of which — after the Pentagon, you'll visit an actual *Congressional hearing*."

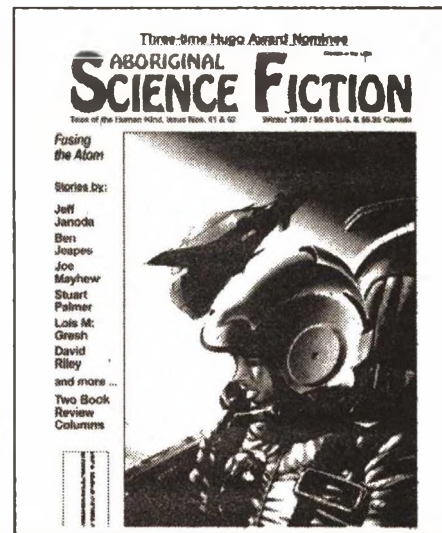
This sent the tour group into an ecstasy of untranslatable chitters and squeaks.

"O marvelous!" the Arcturian cried. "Will they testify under oath? This is better even than garbage in the streets!"

"And finally," the President concluded, "you'll get to see actual diplomacy at the United Nations. A frank and open exchange of views!"

At this the Rigellians and the Sirians and even the starfish-like creatures from galaxy M-31 began to chant, DIPLOMACY, DIPLOMACY, WE WANT DIPLOMACY.

"O wonderful sight!" cried the Rigellians. "Magnificent spectacle! Watts pales by comparison! By all means, lead on to Washington!" □



## Our Next Issue

The next issue of *Aboriginal* will feature a cover by British artist Chris Moore and the following short stories: "The Catafalque," by Scott M. Azmus, "A Drop of Aconite," by J. Brooke, "De Rerum," by Eliot Fintushel, "Day the First, Day the Last," by Dan Persons, "Water of Life," by Michael Shea, and "Crime and Punishment on the Take-Away," by A. John Wallace. We will also have our usual assortment of book reviews, Robert A. Metzger's science column, and a new film preview column by Marvin Kaye.

# Angel with a Stainless-Steel Soul

By B. McLaren

Art by Jon Foster

Jill manhandled the smartdrugger and slung him upside the wall. "Say it again," she yelled. Her shout cut through Top 40s, it erased laughter and backbeat and jive.

Now, with her elbow on the geek's windpipe, she saw that his oh-so-fashionable Orientalized eyelids were just plain *droopy*.

Jill's lips moved. Cluster-bomb drum riffs mutilated her voice. But Mister I.Q. could read lips.

Brainiac blinked. He did a *wubba wubba wubba* — one big Barney-Rubble-eyed gape ... so Jill leaned on him.

And when Einstein Jr. shouted the answer in her ear redux:

Oh *yeah*.

She dropped the smartdrugger (still pawing at fallen phials of centrophenoquine and nootropin) and fumbled her way through boy-girl-boy-girl-boy to the nearest lime-green EXIT.

The door banged open.

Her heels clicked like dice on the ceramic street.

*Blood farmer*, she thought, with the part of her mind that could still think. A sense of sick discovery informed each syllable.

In the hot Atlanta night, Jill wondered for the first time exactly *why*.

Why she'd brought her little sister along.

Why *this* trip?

And why visit the *bad* part of town, where zeks and zobops roam?

Until finally the refrain bit its own tail — *my fault, all my fault* —

Jill yanked off her high heels and ran.

Bright storefronts whipped past. They fleered, jeering 3-D ads: ORBITAL VACATIONS CHEAP! CUSTOM PERSONALITY SCULPTING — LOW RATES. LIMBS BOUGHT AND SOLD, RETAIL & WHOLESALE. Holograms mated, spawned, frenzied — and on her face, a prickle of warm rain — until a corner of her mind, like an accusation, announced *dome condensation*. The sooty drizzle from Atlanta's geodesic shell.

Black dome rain was ruining her green chenille evening dress.

Christ!

Green chenille!

She laughed hysterically, and her fist battered a vidphone till its liquid crystal screen splintered. She forced herself to stand still on the gleaming pyroceramic street.

No time for this, she told herself. While she sucked at her bruised fist, tasted blood. While she stared at the pink neon of the wrecked vidphone kiosk. You're not some yuppoid, you're a *pro*. And you're losing it.

*And so would you*, herself replied. *So would you ... if your sister just got taken down by a blood farmer.*

Jovy probably thinks all the bastard wants is her panties off ...

Sagging against the mirror-steel shutters of a locked storefront, she watched her reflection quiver. Hot cheek against cold steel: she concentrated on that.

Only that.

Oh Jesus, she prayed. Please. Not my little sister. Not Jovy.

Please. *Everyone* knows better than to let a blood farmer get you alone —!

Everyone ... except Jovy.

Except my sister.

How could she be so *stupid*?

It seemed suddenly grotesque that no one else noticed, no one else cared.

Oblivious, air traffic navigated the night sky. The constellations inched across zenith, indifferent to the fact that somewhere, in some back-alley biolab, a tank was being readied for Jovy ...

For my sister.

They'll crack her bones and implant viruses. They'll remove most of her organs. She'll stay alive. They don't kill you: blood farmers need their victims alive. They'll put Jovy on complete life support, use her as a growth medium for experimental bacteria. A human testbed for gray-market organs just out of the DNA vat and too cheap or too dangerous to risk on expensive monkeys ... So they'll use my sister. Maybe they'll even hire her out as a proving ground for Black Medicine cyberweapons, recombinant organisms that burrow into their victim, and ...

Stop!

Atlanta wasn't shut down. Not yet. Not like some cities. There were still people she could bribe — old friends she could use.

On the fragrant July wind, the smells of illegal biolabs forced their way into her nostrils.

Bad quarter of a rotten city, she told herself. People vanish here. Even someone who knows her way around can come up missing.





Wasn't Jovy's fault, she told herself. Mine. All mine.

Had to flit back to Atlanta to say goodbye to it all, didn't I?

Even though I was *out* of the life. Even though I *made* it, I got quit of this rotten stuff, and I came back for one day, just *one day*, to visit old friends —

In mirror-steel shutters she caught a glimpse of herself. Not quite as chic as the *Vogue* ad who'd stepped off the gravity shuttle with Sis three hours ago. No longer the doyen of the club called The Killing Ground, the clever urchin who'd ju-jitsu'd a serious jones with the DNA helix into legit consulting sugar for a biotech *gesellschaft*.

No, now Jill saw an elf with a black razorcut (too retro) and fluorescent lipstick (too fluoro — blame the advertising holos) and green eyes (much much *much* too frightened).

Kumiko?

The name touched her lips like a prayer. She whispered it to no one — to the empty street ... to a trio of good old boys git-on-downing under the advertising holos. *Yo, bay-bee, what's the skinny? Y'all wanna party hearty, char?*

Jill turned from the three blitzed wobblefats.

Kumiko will know the blood farmer who took my sister, she told herself. She'll know who and she'll know how, and she'll know where.

**Z**eks. Jill noticed two of them talking at a table; the pair stopped, watched her, then inhaled another jolt of pure oxygen. Two more ... and two more. And then Jill saw that the gas bar was chock full.

Zeks everywhere. Bar-code tattoos fluoresced bright blue on their shaved heads. She looked up, saw UV instead of normal glarestrips in the ceiling — a badge of pride, then.

They want everyone to know they're zeks.

They're proud of it.

She'd been in here before, years back. But it hadn't been this extreme. This defiant.

This desperate. Not then.

The word derived from a Russian term, Jill remembered, searching among the cueball forest of shaved skulls. In the last century, zeks had been Siberian prisoners — gulag inmates.

Now, on the permanently depilated heads of men and women throughout the room, machine-readable tattoos flickered like fractal flames: gene criminals all, convicted of proscribed DNA manipulation. Their credit records wiped, their universal I.D. numbers erased, what else to do?

What indeed. Band together; form yet another substratum of Atlanta's informal economy ... beat the devil at his own game.

COGITO ERGO SUCK ME, she read on a plaque above the bar.

Zeks.

At the end of the bar a bald girl waved.

C'mon, she motioned. Share some O<sub>2</sub>.

Jill plopped her rear on a bar stool.

Overhead, gas masks dangled from accordion hoses. The zeks breathed deep, eyes closed, masks clamped tight. Pure oxygen: a delicate rush, infinitely superior to the crude designer drugs of the above-ground economy.

"Konbanwa," whispered Jill, and the bartender asked if she wanted nitrous oxide, or perhaps something special?

Jill shook her head.

At the other end of the bar *karaoke* singers mouthed ballads from the last century. Western songs ...

She watched her friend Kumiko inhale while dissonant piano notes tinkled and jarred.

"*Ohaiyo gozaimasu*. It's after midnight, therefore morning. Didn't know you were back in town, Jill-san."

No answer for that. Her cheeks burned while she studied the teak surface of the bar. Sashimi — strips of fish soaked in soy sauce — iridesced on black lacquered trays, free for the taking. Same as always. At least that part of the gas bar hadn't changed.

Jill felt suddenly disjunct from her old life ... oddly out of phase, like a neutrino passing through light-years of solid lead.

"For one day, Kumiko. I was going to look you up. But I never got the chance —"

"Dozo — please. No apologies. You made it. You're out of the life. Good for you, that's what I say. Better you stay the hell out of Atlanta than end up like me."

Jill chewed her lip. The susurrus of the crowd kept shouldering aside her worry; respirators' hiss and gurgle threatened to relax her shoulder muscles. I'm out of it, she told herself, that part of my life is over.

Over.

Isn't it?

"You know why diatomic oxygen appeals to zeks? Because to the outcast purity offers the greatest appeal."

Jill nodded.

Amputated from decent society, she realized, the zeks had created their own: a second economy. Information. Bits of gossip as currency, an underground specie of rumor and rant.

"It's my sister. Jovy. Remember her? She's all grown up now."

"Oh, god. Tell me everything."

"I stopped — *we* stopped — by The Killing Ground, that club down on the waterfront. Some smartdruggie kept hitting on me to buy his centrophoxine. He was in my *face*, I couldn't see her. And all of a sudden —"

Jill broke. She gripped the black-enamelled edge of the bar. The urge to spew punched a lancet of agony through her gut. "... And then Jovy wasn't there and the 'druggie told me a blood farmer took her down."

Kumiko sat very still. Then, gently, she took both of her friend's hands. "You have a few hours. A blood farmer will need at least that long to prepare the tank

... and your sister. How can I help?"

*Osewani narimashita*, Jill breathed. *Thank you for what you have already done for me.*

"Tell me who's new — which blood farmer works the waterfront clubs?"

The Japanese girl steeped her hands, and her eyes glittered in the ultraviolet light. "There's Jackson, of course. You remember him."

"I remember."

"He goes way back — he was running a blood farm when you were still in the life, *hai*?"

"Yeah. He tried to get me to supply him with orphans. Kids no one would miss." Jill felt muscles tighten underneath her jaw. "Told the fucker I'd supply him with a surgical probe up his anus next time he talked to me. After that, he stayed clear. At least Jackson knew when to back off."

"Not far enough. Feds picked him up last month ... As I recall, they reamed him hard. Pucker city."

"Sure he's not out on bail?"

"*Hai*, very sure. Interstate gene trafficking. He's in a federal cryo tank, awaiting arraignment. Then there's Lefevre — but you say your sister left with a *man*?"

"Tall. Silver hair."

"Could be Jahid. He's the only one left, it *must* be Jahid. Except ..."

"Except?"

"Odd. Now that I think, I've never seen him in The Killing Ground."

"Don't know him."

Kumiko bit her lip. A toss of her head rubbed her skull with Top-40s laserlight; then shadow turned the Japanese girl into a blue ice floe.

"He's new. Blood farmers don't last long nowadays, not since the crackdown. Happened just after you left, *Jill-san*. I won't ask if there's a connection."

"Would I have any more friends in Atlanta than I do now?"

"*Iye!* You burned them all down. Most of my *uchi* people still hate your guts."

*Uchi*, thought Jill. And *sato*. Inside the group and outside.

I'm *sato* now, sure as hell.

The Japanese girl smiled sadly. She fingered the fluorescent tattoo on the side of her head, momentarily eclipsing its blue flame. An unconscious gesture, Jill realized. Kumiko has been a *zek* for so long she doesn't think of herself as one.

But neither do I, she realized with a shock.

She's just my oldest friend ... and there's no reason, no reason at all for her to help me. Not after what I did to her.

Which was exactly why, Jill realized, her friend Kumiko *would* help her.

"You need to meet Zook," said the Japanese girl as she stood and shoved a data flake at the bartender. Payment for the evening — as always, digitized rumors. "He's the one who'd know how to find Jahid, if anyone does. I'll take you."

The warehouse smelled of agar. A warm, moist scent; and underneath, faint as the afterhum of a bell, was the surgical bouquet of ethyl alcohol — and on top (adding character and a certain piquant reserve), a frisson of free methyl groups.

Jill stood in the aisle of the warehouse with her eyes shut. She breathed deep.

"*What?*" whispered Kumiko. "What's making you so damned happy?"

Jill shook her head, tasting the rich perfume of amino acids.

The life.

You can walk away from it, she realized, but it's still in your blood. Once you've run a gray-market biolab, you never forget. Every lab has its own unique scent. Anyone in the life could tell with one sniff ... Jill could recite by rote *exactly* which proteins were being brewed in the warehouse around her, and by what strain of genetically modified *E. coli*. Which was why all biolabs were hermetically sealed, she reflected, with airlocks for exit and entry to the street.

That, and to keep aerobic bacteria from contaminating the growth vats.

She looked up. Sealed gradostats vusted up toward the girder-work ceiling, chains of linked cylinders churning and fizzing with a billion recombinant cells. Avogadro's number of microscopic cash registers. The bacteria didn't care. Snip their RNA, insert a new sequence, and they'd happily express dekaliters of off-brand endorphins, kilograms of gray-market hormones and banned enzymes.

This particular protein foundry gave off a peaceful smell. No lethal proteins here. No assassination viruses. She could tell. The bouquet told all.

Overhead, a sonic boom shook the ceiling. She saw the building's exoskeleton expand and contract ever so slightly.

"Cosmodrome, char," said a voice behind her right ear. "Them Orient Express space planes break Mach 5 'fore they gwan leave Atlanta stratosphere. Hoo! All Babylon be yellin' when that cosmodrome built five year back. But we poor folk. Atlanta city council don't pay no 'tention to us."

She turned.

A zobop, she told herself. Just a Haitian with cosmetic gene surgery. Nothing but a zobop. That's all.

All!

"I-'n-I think you not be likin' us Modifieds, seen?"

"Wouldn't have my own DNA edited," Jill swallowed. "But some of my best friends are Modifieds."

Correction: the zobop had once been a Haitian. Now, only his face gave a hint of the Caribbean. The rest of him owed its provenance to other species than *homo sapiens*. With bits and pieces of DNA cut and pasted from distant phyla, the zobop could have passed for a medieval monster: red crab-claw arms and furred hooves.

"Let me guess: you were born in Haiti, but now you live in the Big Easy. Down south of New Orleans, right?"

"Sure! How you gwan know dat, char? You be Miss

Steppin' Razor herself?"

"Your accent. My mother came from Louisiana, south of New Orleans. Took me years to lose it."

"You need help your sister, seen? Miko say we got to find her quick-and-quick."

"A blood farmer took her down. Kumiko says you'd know him ... Jahid."

The zobop cursed. Tourmaline beads flashed in his dreadlocks, a blue hailstorm that whirled around him when he tossed his head in rage. "Dat mon gwan fall long ways down!"

"So you *do* know him?"

"I-'n-I knows 'bout the mon grab you sister. Char! *Everyone* in Babylon know Jahid. Some folk think he Oggun Badagris his own self. But he hurt too many peoples, now he gwan feed on darkness."

"Tell me where his biolab is. I'll retire him."

"Char! You listen too much dub? You ain't got the hearin' way? *No* one in Babylon know Jahid's sweet secret place."

Jill felt sick.

She turned; her knees buckled. The pit of her stomach threatened to upend. "*No one* knows where Jahid runs his biolab?"

"How you think that mon stay alive all dem year? Sure, he got his hidey-hole, 'n I-'n-I ain't never gwan find it ... not this night. Not soon 'nuff to help you own sister. Seen?"

Jill nodded.

*Has to be a way*, she told herself. *There has to be.*

"I'm sorry," Kumiko said. "I thought — if anyone would know, Zook would."

Think!

Damn you, Jill told herself, you made enough back when you were in the life. You made all that money because you were good! You stayed sane and out of a brainstrip tank long enough to retire — and if you were so goddamned good, think of something *now*.

"Wait," Jill muttered. "Let me think ..."

"Eh? C'mon, char, what you talkin'?"

She turned. Adrenaline lightning informed her movements: her voice blazed. "Jovy's my sister. We share DNA. That means her pheromones are chemically similar to mine. I can modify an organism to bloodhound me by the smell of my pheromones."

The zobop's brow furrowed. "But what that get you, char? I-'n-I got gene surgery tanks, sure, but dat creature you brew, it just search out *you*. Not that sister yours."

"Jovy had measles. I didn't."

The zobop clicked both crab-claw hands in triumph. "Hah! Now I-'n-I see the Promised Land!"

"*Iye*. I don't." Kumiko frowned. "Your sister had measles — so what?"

"Every time you be sick, char, you body make antigens fight that disease," answered the zobop. "You get measle, the measle antigen stick on dem blood platelet. You got a little book inside you own self, tells all dem sickness you ever had. Same be true with smell, seen? You smell change just little way every time you be ill."

The Japanese girl's eyes widened. "So you build a

creature that recognizes your own pheromones, then —"

"Then I edit its DNA to give it a taste for the non-measles scent Jovy's body puts out."

"But is that possible?"

Jill smiled. "A dog's sense of smell is a million times more sensitive than a human's. I'll use an insect — its sense of smell is a million times more sensitive than any bloodhound's. Count on it; it'll work."

The zobop nodded. "Sure. Dis girl gwan be one jammin' good gene surgeon, I-'n-I sure of dat."

"I *was* one jammin' good gene surgeon. Been out of it two years now."

"No difference. You still gwan be good when you get back in the biz, sistah."

Jill turned to the zobop. "Let me use one of your gene surgery tanks. There's not much time."

She shucked both data gloves and watched the fertilized cell replicate.

"It'll hatch in a couple of minutes," she said. "How long now since Jovy went missing?"

"Coming up on two hours. Still time. They can't have ruined your little one yet, it takes time to prepare a host properly."

In Kumiko's voice, a light frisson of envy made its debut ... And why not?

Guilt hovered over Jill's shoulders for a moment, until she thrust it away. Luck of the draw. I made my bundle, got out. Kumiko stayed in and the feds caught her. Could as easily have turned out the other way 'round.

Oh it could, could it?

"The organism I'm growing is a semispecies," she sighed. "Mostly centipede DNA, modified with some bat and apterid chromosomes. It's not a true species — won't be fertile. And it'll have a short life-span because I'm force-growing the egg to maturity. Three hours. Then it dies. But it'll last long enough to find Jovy."

Inside the virtual reality display, the egg divided at breakneck speed. Flick: the display switched resolutions. Ten thousand cells now, doubling every 2.4 seconds.

"Now we'll see if I can still write DNA code ..."

If one of the people Jill had marked on — (Don't think it.) If she hadn't fingered Kumiko trying to get off, the Japanese girl would still be a citizen.

An accident. It was an accident.

Wasn't it?

Sure it was. Kumiko could have been standing where I am now, she thought, and I could as easily have been the one without a credit rating.

Except ...

Except, she thought, Kumiko didn't burn down most of the people she knew to get a free pass from the feds.

The *nihonjin* caught her eye and Jill was struck, suddenly, by the perfection of her friend's face. A superb Japanese nose, eyes gracefully epicanthic in the classic style: an *Ukiyo-e* woodblock print come

alive.

Not everyone, Jill told herself. I didn't burn down *everyone* when I left Atlanta ...

Just the creeps.

The blood farmers. The tumor brokers. The gene surgeons who went bad and turned to brewing assassination orgs. The motherfuckers — that's who I aced when I made my dash for the cash.

Sure, herself answered. And the guards at Treblinka were only following orders.

"Crap," Jill cursed under her breath. "No time for this."

Both the zobop and the Japanese girl turned her way.

"Nothing," she choked. "Look. The yolk is forming ..."

Jill, she thought, you're getting old. First, retirement, then a legit job ... now a conscience. Stop thinking so much. Just do what comes naturally.

And if that something happens to be (as they say) "informal"?

Then you're back in the life ... and you're — Bullshit. Admit it, lady. You're *glad*.

She shook her head, knelt alongside the artificial placenta that nourished a wriggling black Calder mobile, and placed a hand on the womb's leathery surface ... the better to feel its pulse.

Its snake-scale skin beat slow time under her fingers; like the rest of the biolab, the pseudowomb was itself a black market DNA design.

Ditto the warehouse itself ... a huge plant grown from a seed. Like most of the city of Atlanta.

"Parturition," she said.

The womb fissured. A black scaly blob slithered out, dripping golden amnion.

The org fell to the floor.

A wet black bag.

It lay there ... pulsating.

Beautiful, thought Jill. Her breath caught in her throat.

It looked beautiful.

Once a gene surgeon, always a gene surgeon. The black centipede gleamed like a living gem, its hundred-odd legs akimbo, jittering with sudden life.

The org scuttled toward Jill.

It stopped.

Black antennae swiveled.

The centipede unfurled gossamer wings. A wet black bag no longer, it buzzed into the air and looped barrel rolls with impossibly grace. Now it gleamed like a blue-green dragonfly.

The creature flew out the door.

"It's got Jovy's scent. Call an air taxi, would you, Kumiko?"

The zobop told the building's central ganglion to keep watch *in absentia*. The building's voice sounded distant, sad, when it answered — Jill looked up. She

saw a great dim ruby set in the ceiling, the nervous plexus of the warehouse that rumbled an answer deep as a beaten oil drum.

And then Zook led the way to the street.

Outside ...

Past midnight?

Atlanta rippled blue-green on puddles of dome rain. A night like this, Jill thought, made the corroded pavement look like a million Kandinskys laid out end to end.

The air taxi arrived in a blast of hot wind.

"How you gwan follow that critter, char?"

Jill leaned against the window of the air taxi. She felt novocained, surgically amputated from the dwelling pylons of Atlanta that glided past below.

"I implanted a packet transmitter in the organism. Sending coordinates to Kumiko's pocket phone."

The Japanese girl turned, studied her with eyes green as the trees in Hokusai's Edo. She handed the pocket phone over; in the zobop's claws, its screen glowed cyan and magenta. Emerald streets, turquoise intersections ... and left of center a bright diamond.

"*Yoroshiku oengai-shimasu*, toward Eighth Street, please," Kumiko told the air taxi. "Change to a lower altitude as soon as possible."

The taxi's voice recognition unit took an extra moment to unbend the kinked Japanese consonants before it chirped *thank you*.

Jill felt the air taxi bank.

"Three hours since Jovy went missing," the girl from an *Ukiyo-e* print told her friend. "We'll find your little one."

But that isn't the problem. Is it, Jill?

"Nothing," she said to the zobop and the Japanese girl. "It's nothing."

The shriek of the taxi's turbines rose an octave, and Jill felt her stomach drop away as they angled for a landing.

**S**o this is what a blood farm looks like, she thought.

The infrared light made all the tanks indistinguishable. A charnel house full of six-foot-long embers.

And the smell?

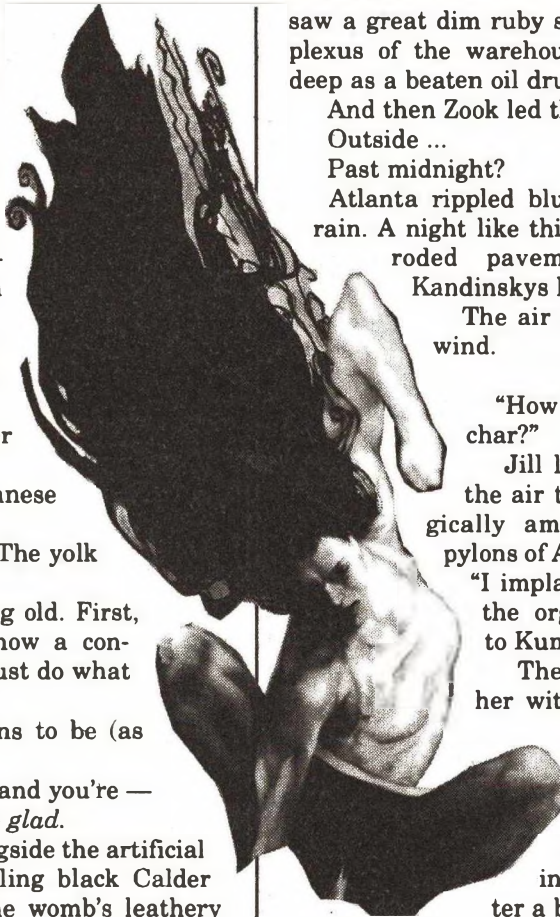
Antiseptic.

The cold scent of formaldehyde and betadine. A professional reek that spoke of gleaming autopsy slabs and razor edges.

The room looked unnaturally clean.

Like a bone, Jill thought, picked bare by scavengers.

Between the long double row of tanks she stopped,



put her hand out. The quartz sarcophagi felt warm to the touch, slick, slippery.

She swallowed — or tried to.

Then she moved on.

Kumiko handed her a large metallic insect and Jill weighed it in one hand. Squibb Viper. By the mass, a Model 9.1.1, last year's RNA revision. A black-market bioweapon, penalty for possession ten years stripped off the top of your brain. A federal crime.

Jill placed the metallic beetle against her forearm and felt it come alive.

Four tiny legs clamped around her wrist, and a sudden sting penetrated between her radius and ulna bones as a proboscis punched through her skin, mated with her central nervous system.

Why not?

As long as I'm back in the life, Jill thought, might as well break all the federal statutes.

Time downshifted into first.

Hot sensations blazed through her notochord — the taste of lemons, an icicle chill inside her joints ... and behind both eyelids, an alien awareness came home to roost. The Squibb Viper's nervous system, she thought, with great speed and precision. A second very specialized brain time-sharing with hers.

The room changed. It ran with liquid-helium colors. All around her, solarized green and blue shapes stood out; Jill now saw via the infrared-sensitive eyes of the bioweapon mated to her wrist.

She could pick out the serial numbers of the cryo tanks in dim infrared light, she could read them as clearly as if it were high noon.

Jill's arm twitched and tingled. It jerked up, cobra-quick. Ready to kill.

She wondered where Kumiko had gotten three Squibb Vipers ... U.S. bioweapon arsenal? Fort Detrick biowar lab?

Better not to know.

"Over there," Kumiko whispered. "Something hot."

An untranquilized human body?

The rest of the living dead in the tanks slept through their long season in hell. Experimental viruses ate at the bone marrow of old men and white-haired grandmothers whose eyes were shrivelled shut. *What would it feel like to serve as a living Petri dish?* Jill wondered while she passed children and —

And ...

God!

She fought an overpowering urge to gag. It doubled her up against the tank and made her vision blur.

The nausea passed.

A pregnant woman lay inside the quartz sarcophagus ... with an assassination organism clamped to her stomach.

The woman's eyelids twitched. A vein pulsed along her forehead: the woman was still alive.

Jill forced herself to look away.

She moved on.

"Here. I found Jovy. Second aisle over."

Kumiko and the zobop looked over her shoulder while she shut down the tank alarm and cracked the airtight seal.

A whisper ...

Cold air wafted from the tank. Inside, Jovy lay fetus-curved in a web of fiber optic cables. Biomonitor. It wouldn't do to let a valuable human Petri dish grow ill, would it?

Bastards!

Jill leaned down to cradle her sister's head and saw Jovy's lips move, heard a whisper.

"A bad dream," she answered. "It's a bad dream, go back to sleep."

She brushed blond strands from her sister's forehead and hauled her out, set her gently on the anti-septic floor.

"Ceiling," said Kumiko, and then she fell.

Jill's arm moved before she could complete the thought. A blur, the metallic insect clamped to her arm spat three projectiles.

They swept aside in mid-air, detonated.

The shrapnel scarred one of the growth tanks.

Countermeasures — intercepting projectiles.

Jill dropped to one knee and touched the left carotid artery on the Japanese girl's neck. Alive. She looked up, prompted by the second mind that cohabited her skull.

A red gem pulsed overhead.

The building's central ganglion.

It's protecting itself, she thought.

She yanked Jovy free of the tank and ripped away the fiber optic leads, then tore the Squibb Viper from her wrist after keying it for *seppuku*.

The room screamed.

Tentacles rose from the floor, and Jill slashed with her scalpel. Venom stung her cheek before she made it to the door with Kumiko and Jovy.

As cold as a dewar of liquid helium, the night wind brushed her with shudders when the building shuddered and fell in.

Viral hecatomb.

"Peptide-induced autoimmune lysis," she told the zobop. The scream of the air taxi's turbines almost covered those of the dying building. "Most graymarket buildings in Atlanta use the same basic DNA as the Squibbs. Always cheaper to modify someone else's DNA code than write it from scratch."

"Thanks, char. I'n'I gwan remember dat one."

The building spat serum and ichor as it burned. Self-immolation, of course. Better than the slow agony of the virus.

One long Jackson Pollock painted against the sky, then night and stars and Jovy gasping.

Lips blue.

Fingernails dark purple —

Cardiac arrest, said a part of her mind while she cradled Sis. While the zobop shouted.

While the building burned.

Jovy's corpse burned pure white under the autopsy lamps.

"*Itai desu,*" Kumiko said. "It hurts, yes?"

Jill didn't hear.

She reached into Jovy's open stomach and probed with a scalpel at the assassination org.

A beautiful fractal creature, pale silvery ridges of muscle studded with the poison-secreting glands called nematocysts.

The dead org's thirty-two annular eyes stared up at her.

"Thing's full of acetylcholine agonists," she said. "Nerve poison. But it never secreted any. Why not?"

She checked Jovy's pupils. Fixed. Dilated.

Her sister's wrist felt stiff.

Already?

Rigor?

"No," Jill said, and stripped off her surgical gloves. "This isn't right. Why grab Sis just to grease her? You're a blood farmer, you keep your victim *alive*. Maximize profits. And the rigor mortis ..."

Kumiko touched her shoulder and Jill wrenched away.

The girders of the warehouse gleamed red and purple overhead while Jill paced. She stared up, blinking back the pain. The confusion.

Above her blazed a map of the zobop's gray-market business: spots of infrared and ultraviolet light tailored to the different species of bacteria growing in his vats.

The roar of aerators sounded oddly soothing in the darkness. Fractionators, gradostats, ultracentrifuges ... All so familiar. And in the middle of it all, her sister's body gleaming like a pearl ...

"Jovy would have had to be dead for four, maybe five hours to be this stiff."

"But —" The girl from an *Ukiyo-e* print paused.

"Makes no sense. Sis would have had to be post-mortem before the blood farmer snatched her."

Kumiko stood. She turned over the small blonde girl's wrists (Was Sis *really* that small? That pale?) — first one, then the other. "The humerus," she murmured.

"Godammit! *Yes*." Jill yanked an MRI unit up on its gimbals, slammed it into place. She smacked the image processor hidden twixt mini superconducting magnets.

The unhealed bone fracture sinuated like a blue Nordic fjord. A secret river that sliced through hot carmine tendons and ligaments.

Jill shouted and hauled the magnetic resonance imager forward to her sister's head. The display showed a gray almond embedded in a circuit pattern.

Not a human brain.

Inside the skull casing, a rat's brain amid a zig-zag rat of bioschips.

"This isn't Jovy! It's a meat puppet, an organism that looks human but isn't. And it almost worked. They inoculated it with measles, sprayed it with Jovy's pheromones, even broke the right humerus bone, the way Jovy broke *her* right wrist when she was a kid — but there wasn't time for the fracture to heal. It's still fresh, no osteopoesis."

Kumiko looked at her oldest friend. "*Sukoshi wakarimasu*. I understand a little ..."

"You'll understand more," Jill answered. "A lot more. At The Killing Ground."

Kids moshed to the thunder of beating hearts. Slam-dancers smacked into Jill, and she hurled them away. They flung themselves at her while blue green argon lasers strafed the crowd and she smelled E, vasopressin, the garlic sachet of DMSO.

It made her feel old.

Cutting through the slam-dancers, she felt like the occupant of a bathyscaphe sent down to study the creatures at the bottom of the Cayman Trench. Strobes stop-motioned flailing bodies; a green face stared, a violet eyebrow rose, a plastic bone necklace whirled toward her and whipped away.

Five-minute movers and football hoolies West Ending it in their own private bit of *Angleterre* in the center of Atlanta. How veddy British.

"Remember me?" Jill shouted.

The smartdrugger strobe-turned, strobe-flinched, strobe-fell, smashing a broken-mirror sculpture.

Freeze frame:

Blacksuited boy on his knees —

Shards of mirror catching green laserlight —

"Told him," he gasped. Adrenalin sharpened its claws on his cheeks. He was very aware of her rep. Totally amped, utterly stoked with fear. "Flaming Jahid."

"Where?" Jill asked. "Where is flaming Jahid, pray?"

But by then it had become a rhetorical device.

Because a silhouette with silver hair stood in the quartz booth that overlooked the club, and Jill no longer saw the smartdrugger's razorslash mouth, no longer paid attention to his rattlesnake eyes.

She climbed the spiral staircase to the place of endings.

The room had been furnished with antiques. Isamu Noguchi sculptures, Calder mobiles, Roy Lichtenstein paintings.

The roar of music immolated itself when the door scissored shut, and a silhouette behind a desk spoke.

"Pongo," said the silhouette. "You're thinking, 'He's a Pongo.' A velcrohead. Or is it a bit of the other we're looking for ... is that it?"

One of the Calder mobiles unfolded bronze tentacles. It uprooted itself from the floor.

"You're Jahid," Jill said. "That's what I'm thinking."

The Isamu Noguchi sculpture untwined its cilia and pulsated. It opened a spike-ringed maw.

She caught the sickly scent of digestive fluids.

"Your real blood farm is here," she said. "Under this club. I finally realized it when I remembered the name: The Killing Ground. You have to rub it in everyone's faces. You love doing that, don't you?"

And the silhouette leaned forward behind his desk.

His face, dipped in light, looked beautiful.

A Sloane Ranger, chestnut eyes to die for, Berber bone structure as fine as any she'd seen. Veddy uppah-clahss. No Fleet Street flannels for this one, strictly Savile Row.

"I thought about it when my friend Kumiko said she'd seen other blood farmers working The Killing Ground, but not you. You never visited this club. I asked myself why. And then I understood — if you owned the club, you'd never want to show your face."

The Calder mobile scuttled forward on spidery legs. Its planes and volutes everted, became claws.

"A Haitian friend checked the property tax records for the city of Atlanta," Jill continued. "The warehouse on the waterfront — the one I destroyed — is owned by one of your competitors."

"Pity you didn't go to Oxford. You'd have taken a first."

The silhouette behind the desk straightened. It elongated.

A silvery insect gleamed on its wrist. "Time to sleep now," he said.

"*C'est la mort?*"

"Indeed not," he answered. A trace of pique sandpapered his Eton accent. "This is going to be rather delicate. Quite difficult. Ordinarily, the organisms here would take care of a body ... no evidence. But we can't have a death. Not in your case. A memory lapse, perhaps ... You really oughtn't to have come here, you know. You really oughtn't."

"No?"

She backhanded the blood farmer and he slammed into the wall.

The Calder mobile wilted and fled. The Noguchi sculptures emitted thin whistles of terror.

The blood farmer stumbled to his feet.

Jill swung him into the light. She hit him hard, in the gut. The bioweapon attached to his wrist changed colors like a piece of metal under a blowtorch, and the blood farmer's fine Berber features shone with sweat.

He held out his wrist, but the bioweapon only fluttered its calyx open and shut, open and shut.

"My friend Kumiko bought a Squibb Viper with last month's RNA rev. 9.1.1. She got it from a black-market arms dealer."

She kned him in the face and he slammed into the wall.

"So I said to myself, I'll bet Atlanta hasn't changed ... bet everyone still buys the same cyberweapons from the same dealer."

She hit him with the flat of her hand, and the blood farmer skidded onto his back. "Guess I was right. And all it took to make that thing on your wrist roll over and die was a peptide that sets off an autoimmune reaction in the Viper Rev 9.1.1's nervous system."

The blood farmer was on his knees.

He trembled like a rabbit subjected to electric current.

"You didn't have foreign organics on you, luv. Checked — when you came through that door —"

Something is wrong, she thought. He isn't trying to kill me.

Why isn't he trying to kill me?

The answer didn't come. So she gave one to his question.

"Not on me. My friend Kumiko, on the dance floor. She's wearing a perfume. A heavy perfume. It's made from a Class I Major Histocompatibility Complex that binds the peptide, and it's airborne. You've been breathing it for five minutes. Antibodies without immunization. It's why your body's rejecting the Squibb Viper. It's why you feel so sick you can't move."

She closed her hand around the blood farmer's throat. "Now that we've been properly introduced," she told him, "*I want to know where my sister is. And I want to know now.*"

He kicked and kicked.

"You went to a lot of goddamn trouble. You tried to convince me Jovy was dead. *Why?*"

Jill was shouting now. She let the blood farmer go, and he fell twitching on the deep pile rug.

Then she took a scalpel from her blouse pocket and slipped off its plastic sheath.

"Tell me what you did with her."

He drooled crimson.

"Tell me," she said. "Or it's going to be a very long, very red night."

From the shadows behind the desk, a second shadow —

Jill whirled.

"Don't. Please. Don't hurt him."

Jill stared. She stood nailed to the spot while her little sister gently touched the blood farmer's brow and wiped the red stains from his broken nose.

"Oh, Christ," Jill said. She felt ill. "Oh, God, the two of you set this all up. Jovy, why, why?"

The girl knelt. In the overhead track lighting she looked like a da Vinci angel.

"He's bleeding," she said. Tears glittered in her eyes.

"Get out of here, Jovy."

And her little sister continued to dab at the blood farmer's face.

She pulled Jovy away from him and pushed her toward the door. "I said *get out of here*. There isn't time. Dammit, do what I tell you, get out *now!*"

"You hurt him. He's bleeding. Why did you do that?"

"Don't argue with me. Jovy, god damn you —"

She picked her little sister up with one hand and hauled on Jovy's arm until her little sister couldn't curse any more, and that was when the ceiling imploded. Jill thought she heard someone shout Federal Genetic Enforcement, but the riot gas made everything blurry.

"Too," she tried to say. "Soon."

In front of her a boot crunched on plaster dust, and that was the last thing she heard.

Jovy looked at her through ten centimeters of blastproof plastic.  
"Listen." Jill put her hand on the transparent face of the holding cell. "I can fix it. I can tell them —"



"What? Tell them what?"  
"Tell them it was all Jahid's idea, that —"

"Try again, Big Sister. Too droopy, too old. Too boring."

The detention room was white, pure white, blindingly white.

Jovy wore a disposable paper garment. The kind all federal prisoners wear.

"Look," Jill said. "I've got leverage. They owe me, I gave them Jahid."

And she saw her sister's face.

She backed away.

"Just the way you burned down all your friends when you left Atlanta. You've got no honor, you've got *nothing*."

Jill felt sick. She leaned against the transparent wall of plex.

"Don't talk to me about conscience, Big Sister. You could have saved those people in the warehouse. But instead you destroyed it. Right?"

Oh, God. No. Please ...

"Fact is, you didn't give a damn. You haven't thought twice about all those people you killed. Have you, Jill?"

Please.

Please, no.

Her sister bared perfect teeth. "All you care about is yourself, Jill. You sold out everyone you ever knew. And now you've sold me out, too. All I wanted was to live with Jahid. So we came up with a plan. It was so easy ... all you had to do was let me go. Let go of your imaginary perfect sister. But you couldn't. And now you've sold us both, haven't you?"

Jill tried to say no.

"*Haven't you?*" Jovy screamed.

"Please. They're going to brainstrip you. Tell them ... Tell them —"

"Tell them what? What's left? What's left to tell?"

Please. Jill felt as though her intestines were being ripped out and stuffed with crushed ice. She felt as though her eyes were being torn from her head.

Please ...

"I'm not like your stupid friend Kumiko. She's a *zek*, and she owes it all to you. And she *still* doesn't hate you."

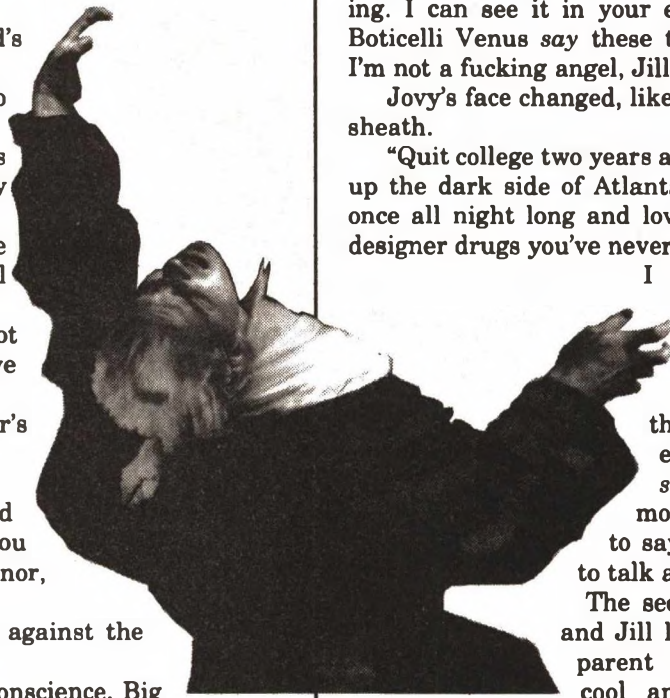
A matron took Jovy by the arm. "And here's the classic part: you think I'm your little da Vinci angel," the blonde girl laughed. The girl who had been her little sister.

The girl. Who. Had been.

Not after they brainstripped her. Jovy wouldn't be anyone's sister after a lifetime of memories had been burned out of her skull.

A stranger.

Jovy would be a stranger then.



"Right now," Jovy said. "That's what you're thinking. I can see it in your eyes. How can this little Boticelli Venus say these things? And guess what? I'm not a fucking angel, Jill."

Jovy's face changed, like a knife sliding free of its sheath.

"Quit college two years ago. Been working my way up the dark side of Atlanta. Fucking three guys at once all night long and loving it. I've shot up with designer drugs you've never even heard of. First time

I met Jahid was at his place. They wheeled in a twelve-year-old runaway girl and sliced her up while we fucked. Jahid is the best piece of ass I've ever had and I don't give a *shit* how he gets his money. So what's there left to say, Big Sister? What's left to talk about?"

The security door boomed shut, and Jill leaned against the transparent wall, feeling the plastic cool and smooth against her

cheek.

She looked at the empty detention cell.

Its whiteness blinded her.

No, she thought. Please.

Please God tell me I did the right thing.

Purple holograms bruised Kumiko's skull when the *nihonjin* found her.

"*Ohaiyo gozaimas,*" Jill said. And finished the latest whisky.

"*Konbanwa.* It is not yet midnight, therefore still evening. May I sit?"

Jill wiped off the table with her hand. Too many wet rings. From too many empty glasses.

"You want to ask me something, *hai?*"

"*Hai.* Yes. How highly perceptive, *hai.*"

"You wish to ask me why I do not hate you. Yes?"

Jill looked at her friend.

She wanted to answer, but the words wouldn't come.

"Perhaps," said the Japanese girl, "I do not know why."

Around them, the bar wailed a Top-40s hologram. Something about never, forever, always. Jill felt the words slice into her the way knives map the cartography of the skin ...

"I don't understand," she said.

"Perhaps I do not know why I do the things I do. Must there always be reasons? Is it always as simple as good and bad, right and wrong?"

"Yes. For me ... it's always exactly that simple."

Sumiko touched her friend's cheek. "And so you have the answer to your koan, *hai?*" □

# Watching Maynard

By Stephen Wallenfels

Art by David LeClerc

I'm admiring my newest purchase, a holocording of the great Pavarotti's grandson, Enrico, singing *Ave Maria*, when the blasted tele-vid announces an incoming call. I glance at the wall monitor display, see it's Ross Vernier, and know that whatever the subject, this is not going to be a short conversation. Reluctantly, I hit the pause button, freezing my life-size Enrico with arms outstretched and mouth open wide. I mash the receive button on the tele-vid. The image of my neighbor snaps into view.

"Mornin', Ross," I say. He is standing in the kitchen, dressed in a camouflage T-shirt and a pair of olive green shorts with USMC stenciled in white letters on one leg. His lean face, recently tanned from a Survival of the Fittest Adventure training course, is smiling broadly. Behind him, the squat but efficient form of his DS-1 is cleaning up breakfast. I ask, "So why the grin? Don't tell me Matilda has finally stopped breaking dishes." I mention this, guessing that he wants to brag about one of his robots — probably the new Domestic Servant model I doubt he can afford.

"Wrong," he says with a slight chuckle and tilt of his head. "Take a look across the street. Wait'll you see what he's up to this time."

Now I understand, and reply with the obligatory scowl and roll of the eyes. "Across the street" means Maynard Tubbs, an illegally obese character who is distressingly secretive. All I know about him is what the neighborhood rumor-mill has been able to generate over the past six months: that he was recently fired from a part-time job at a privately owned drug injection facility, and that he enjoys renting the old two-dimensional Rambo movies they used to show at the Museum of Jungle Wars. I tell Ross to hold on while I walk over to the master control panel and press a button. The living room window depolarizes, passing from an opaque grey to a translucent green. The interior lighting automatically dims to compensate for the UV-laden sunlight now pouring in.

"Apparently Maynard's got himself a new toy," I observe. He is in the middle of his driveway, busily attending to what appears to be a new robot. It is a particularly aggressive looking thing: entirely black, with tracks and turret like a tank and several dish-antennas, and slung low to the ground, offering what must be a small target profile. It is definitely not the type of robot one would buy to mow the grass or do light domestic chores. "That's not an HS-105, is it?" I ask, thinking that its design

looks vaguely familiar.

"Sure as hell is."

"Can't be." My voice remains calm despite the distant alarm sounding in the back of my head. "Maybe it's a 101 or 102 dressed up to look like a 105? Could be he bought one of those modification kits."

Ross laughs. "Look again. Maybe I have a better angle to see than you. Damn thing's got the ordinance pods between the tracks just like the 105s, and if you look right under the main antenna arrays you can see slots for ammo clips." Ross was right. Despite a bad case of denial, I could see the ominous features he described.

"Maybe its a hundred with—"

"Forget it. I'm telling you, Maynard's got himself a goddamn oh-five!"

I know that our neighborhood has its share of old military robots. Since the Army blew out its inventory at the end of the second Cold War, they were pretty much available to anyone with the money and a 16-hour certificate in Advanced Robotic Management. But none of the civilian-owned robots that I am aware of has the firepower this model evidently has, and furthermore, they were allegedly weapons-capable only while on the target ranges hunting other robots. For obvious reasons, the thought of a unit like this in the hands of my neighbor, a guy who spends too much time plugged into a virtual reality feed, is unsettling.

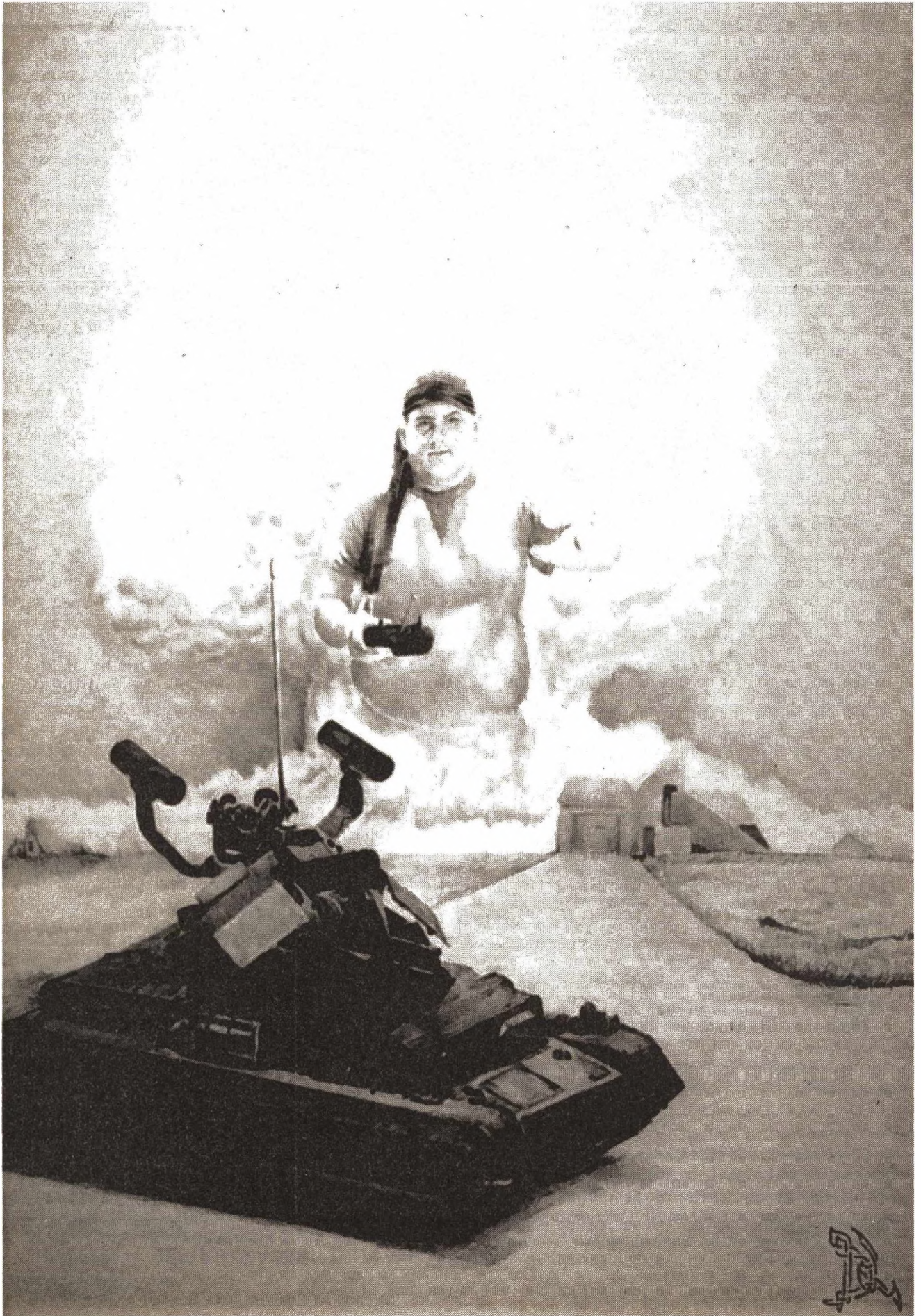
"Yeah, maybe so," I agree, "but at least the thing's non-lethal," I remind him. It is a law. Robots, when off the ranges, can only fire at "officially sanctioned" inorganic targets.

Ross snorts at my naivety. He accepts a steaming cup of something from Matilda, then turns away to look out his kitchen window. He shakes his head. "Sure, it's still non-lethal, but who knows for how long. When I was in the Corps, I knew guys who could retrofit the NLs to take live rounds in a couple of hours. If Maynard knows what he's doing ... shit, anything's possible."

Ross and I exchange glances. He shrugs indifferently. For a moment we are both silent. Watching through my living room window, I can see Maynard working on the back of the robot with a tool that looks like a screwdriver. He seems, in my opinion, to know exactly what he's doing.

"Ross, you see that? What's he up to now?"

"Ummm, looks like he's trying to access the pro-



gramming panel. If he pulls out the NL chip, the unit will go dead. Be nothing more than a boat anchor if he does that." Ross laughs. All I can manage is a weak smile.

A few seconds later, Maynard has the panel off. His right hand disappears inside the robot, then slowly emerges holding some wires delicately between his fingers. He reaches into the tool box beside him and comes out with a pair of wire cutters and a black gadget half the size of a shoe box.

"I'll be a sonuvabitch!" Ross mutters.

"What? What is it? What's that black thing?"

"That's a Marine Corps frequency analyzer he's got there." Ross sounds genuinely impressed.

"So? What's it do?"

"Just a sec," he says, holding up his hand. "Will ya lookit that? I can't believe it."

Maynard attaches two leads from the frequency analyzer to the wires coming from the robot. He adjusts some knobs on the face of the analyzer. Then he picks up the wire cutters, and, after a moment of hesitation, severs the wires from the robot. His corpulent face splits with a malicious grin.

"No! He can't be. It's impossible!"

"Tell me!" I say, stifling the urge to scream. "What's he doing?"

"Tell you what — he's one clever bastard, that's for damn sure. Trying to bypass the motherboard, I'll bet. A guy on the range once told me you could do it if you had a voltage frequency analyzer with the right target acquisition codes."

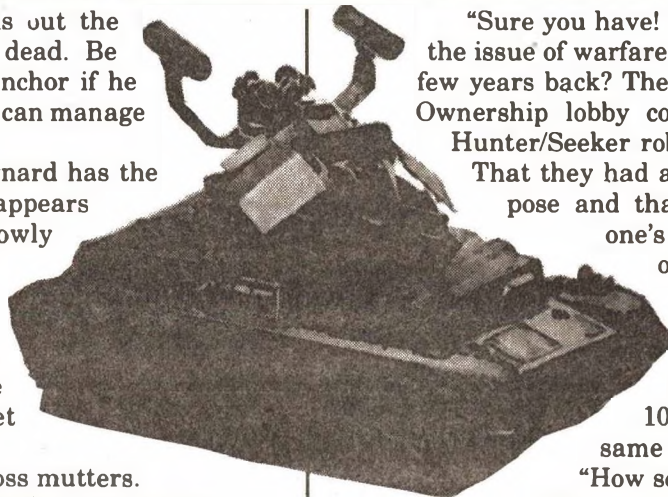
"How did he get his hands on one of those?"

"Easy, really. I've seen 'em pretty cheap at those Weapons Emporium outlet stores. Never figured they might still have the target codes in 'em, though." A car drives by. Maynard stops to watch, wipes his forehead with a shirt sleeve, and returns to his work.

"So what happens if he gets past the motherboard?"

"See, the 105s are used by the military during practice maneuvers to destroy inorganic targets. But they can only destroy targets that transmit a Standard military Target Designation Frequency, or STARDEF. One of the functions of the motherboard is to control the robot's ability, or inability, to acquire targets not transmitting the required frequency. But," he says, pausing to watch Maynard lift a large wooden crate from the back of his station wagon. The crate has tall white numbers stenciled on the side. "But if he bypasses the motherboard, that's when things get interesting. Turns the robot into an HS-105/A52."

"105/A52? I've never heard of those."



"Sure you have! Listen, remember when the issue of warfare robot control came up a few years back? The Association for Robotic Ownership lobby convinced Congress that Hunter/Seeker robots, the 105s, were ok.

That they had a valid recreational purpose and that it was within everyone's constitutional rights to own one. Somehow, they managed to get scaled-down versions of military attack robots, the Hunter/Seeker 105/As, lumped into the same category."

"How scaled down?"

"Not very. They don't carry the tactical nuke stuff, but their laser-guided rockets can penetrate tank armor. They can fire up to 25,000 rounds of high caliber—"

"Can they kill organic targets?"

"Hell," he says, zooming in his image on the display so I could get the full impact of his words. "Fully loaded? One of them could vaporize this entire block!"

"So what I'm doing," I say, trying to put this in perspective, "is watching the neighborhood psycho assemble a military mega-death machine across the street?"

"Yeah, but it's all a big show, really. He'll never get the weapons systems enabled. All the thing's gonna do is rattle around and point its guns." Ross grins, displaying more confidence than I feel the situation warrants. Despite his assurance that we have nothing to worry about, I start wondering if maybe I had done something recently to get Maynard upset with me.

"Hey, Ross? Remember when you and I were talking in your backyard a couple weeks ago? We were joking about Maynard and all the Rambo movies he watches?"

"Yeah, kinda."

"And you said something about if Rambo were that fat he never would have lived past *Rambo I*."

Ross laughs heartily, then finishes with a puzzled smile. "Yeah, so?"

Maynard has opened the wooden crate. Now he is lifting out thin, black, bullet-shaped cylinders about sixteen inches long and laying them carefully in neat rows in the grass. There are about ten of them so far.

"And then we heard sounds on the other side of the fence, as if maybe Maynard was listening."

"Sure, I remember. We figured it was probably Louisa's cat or a squirrel or something like that." Maynard is lifting dark rectangular shapes out of the crate, then inserting them into slots in the robot's side. Ross seems more preoccupied with Maynard's procedure than concerned with my train of thought. I decide to drop it.

"What were those rectangular things?" I ask.

"Ammo clips. 50 caliber, I think." Ross looks toward me, then quickly away. I notice, for the first time, a sheen of perspiration on his forehead.

"And the long tubes? Rockets, I suppose."

"Uh-huh."

With the last of the ammo clips loaded, Maynard starts attaching rockets to the ordnance pods. He works with methodical slowness, carefully lifting what must be fairly heavy weapons. His shirt is sweat-stained from the effort.

Behind me, the pause deactivates on my holocording. Enrico re-animates inside his tube. The sounds of *Ave Maria* fill the house.

"What the hell's that?" Ross asks. His voice is a little too elevated, almost squeaky.

"Enrico Pavarotti—"

"No, goddamn it! I mean in his hand. The goddamn thing in his hand!"

"How the hell should I know!" I scream over Enrico.

"It's an enabler. He's even got a fuckin' remote controlled enabler. Jesus!"

Suddenly, my mind fills with images. Like my two daughters playing in the family room. Like my wife upstairs taking a shower. Like my Hologram collection and the new 72" reception tube I just paid \$3,500 for.

Maynard presses something on the enabler. An antenna extends from the top. Suddenly the robot shudders, then stirs with life. The dish antennas begin to rotate. A red light flashes on top of the turret. Maynard smiles broadly. His eyes look small and dark, like bullet holes.

"Les?" Ross looks at me, his face devoid of color, frozen with an almost quizzical expression. "Maybe you should—"

The turret swivels. For a heart-pounding moment it points at my house, then continues its arc to settle on the house next door. On the tele-vid I can see past Ross, through his kitchen window. I'm looking over his shoulders at the rounded tips of a cluster of laser-guided rockets. Briefly I consider calling to my wife and daughters, warning them. But I realize they would never hear me over Pavarotti.

"What? 'Maybe I should' what?"

Maynard is punching a series of buttons on the enabler.

Ross mumbles something like "targeting solutions", his voice a faint throaty whisper.

"Ross, WHAT SHOULD I DO?"

Maynard points the enabler in Ross's direction, then smiles and waves. I can see the whole thing, as if in slow motion, through Ross's kitchen window. With the flourish of a symphony conductor, Maynard makes a final, enthusiastic press of a button. Ross turns to the screen, his eyes shut tight.

"Kiss my ass goodb ..."

>>> Anne McCaffrey! <<<

>>> Greg Bear! <<<

>>> Tanith Lee! <<<

These & many other great authors are available in special limited editions from Wildside Press. In business 9 years, we have earned 4 World Fantasy Award nominations—and 1 win (for Best Collection of the Year for our set of 2 books by Bradley Denton; see below!)

- 👉 *Cooking Out of This World*, edited by Anne McCaffrey. Finally back in print—the legendary SF cookbook, with recipes by authors such as Harlan Ellison, Poul Anderson, Ursula K. Le Guin, and many, many more. Originally published in 1973, the 1st edition has become a high-priced collectible. But now you can own the definitive text, printed on acid-free paper for years of cooking (and reading!) pleasure. Price: \$10.00 (trade pb); \$40.00 (signed 1st edition hc).
- 👉 *The Dolphins' Bell*, by Anne McCaffrey. With a volcano about to erupt and the devastating alien life form called Thread raining down, Perm's settlers know immediate action must be taken. Wildside's edition of this fine novella features a beautiful wrap-around cover by Pat Morrissey, plus 4 interior illustrations and a border. Elegant. **Less than 20 copies left!** Price: \$8.95 (trade paperback).
- 👉 *An Exchange of Gifts*, by Anne McCaffrey. Fantasy novella. When Meanne, a princess of the realm, runs away from her father's castle and an unwanted suitor, little does she realize the hardships and difficulties that lie ahead of her. Highly recommended by *Locus*, *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, and *Publishers Weekly*. Price: \$25.00 (1st edition hc); \$7.99 (trade pb).
- 👉 *No One Noticed the Cat*. A fantasy novella, published in an extremely limited edition of 119 trade hardcover copies and 28 signed, leatherbound, lettered copies. Includes an extra sheet with this book's fascinating history. Price: \$17.50 (numbered). Few left.

#### ALSO AVAILABLE . . .

- 👉 *Bear's Fantasies*, by Greg Bear. A World Fantasy Award finalist for Best Collection of the Year! Greg Bear's best-selling science fiction novels and stories have garnered him a huge following, but not many people realize he is also a master fantasist. Collected here are 6 of Bear's fantasies, plus a new introduction, "On Losing the Taint of Being a Cannibal." \$10.00 (trade paperback)
- 👉 *The Eighth Stage of Fandom*, by Robert Bloch. Long out of print, the first edition of this book has become a high-priced collectible. Intro by Wilson "Bob" Tucker & afterward by Harlan Ellison. Wry humor, awful puns, and verbal play in 48 essays and 3 poems from fan magazines. Limited to 500 copies. Price: \$35.00 (hardcover)
- 👉 *Weird Tales: 7 Decades of Terror*, edited by Robert Weinberg & John Betancourt. A 500-page collection, with stories from every decade of the magazine's existence. Contains all the old masters & many top contemporary authors. \$12.50 (hardcover)
- 👉 *Sir Harold and the Gnome King*, by L. Sprague de Camp. One of our most popular books, the first new Incomplete Enchanter story in more than 40 years. Harold Shea must rescue his best friend from the world of Norse myth via L. Frank Baum's Oz. If you like the series, this is a must-have addition. Price: \$5.99 (trade paperback)
- 👉 2 by Bradley Denton: *The Calvin Coolidge Home for Dead Comedians* and *A Conflagration Artist* (2 books, sold as a set). 1994 World Fantasy Award-winners for Best Collection, beating all the big guys. Yes, Denton is that great! Price: \$70.00 (300-copy numbered/signed hc set); \$125.00 (deluxe 100-copy leatherbound set); \$250.00 (26-copy lettered set in mahogany slipcase)
- 👉 *Louisa the Poisoner*, by Tanith Lee. An original novella set in Victorian England. Beautiful Louisa was raised in a swamp with one goal in life: to marry rich men, kill them, and inherit their fortunes. Armed with a vial of undetectable poison, Louisa sets out to make her way. But books never prepared her for the realities of life in the outside world . . . Classic dark fantasy! Color dj and B&W interior illustrations by George Barr. \$35.00 (300-copy signed/numbered hc)
- 👉 *Swashbuckling Editor Stories*, edited by John Betancourt. A fun (and very funny) anthology, consisting of stories about (of course) science fiction editors. With tales by David Bischoff, Bruce Bethke, George H. Scithers, & many more. Price: \$7.95 (trade pb); \$35.00 (hardcover signed by all the contributors).

Visit us on the Internet at [www.wildsidepress.com](http://www.wildsidepress.com)

To order, send check or money order (U.S. Dollars only) to:

Wildside Press

Dept. 1A

522 Park Ave.

Berkeley Heights, NJ 07922

Postage: In the United States: \$3.00 for the first book, \$1.00 for each additional book. In New Jersey, add 6% state sales tax.

**MEMTAN ABORIGINAL SF WITH YOUR 1ST ORDER & TAKE A 10% DISCOUNT!** (off the books only, not the postage).

# Many Sequels

## *Starswarm*

By Jerry Pournelle  
Tor, 1998  
349 pp., \$23.95

Tor has been publishing a series of "Jupiter" novels which are intended to capture the spirit of the Heinlein juveniles (several of which are among the best SF ever written) and Jerry Pournelle has contributed *Starswarm* to the series. *Starswarm* is good, but not great. It's just a little too simple, and things work out just a little too



easily for the kids involved.

The scene is a standard-issue Company planet, but at a research station which is about the only non-Company place on it. A kid growing up there has a secret

### Rating System

☆☆☆☆☆	Outstanding
★★★★☆	Very Good
★★★☆☆	Good
★★☆☆☆	Fair
★☆☆☆☆	Poor

(secret even from the uncle he lives with) direct-to-the-brain computer connection and talks to an AI program which seems to exist only to watch over him and guide him and help him out.

The research station is studying the Starswarms, huge aquatic plants that have a mysterious connection with other life in the area. The local life is strange, but not too strange and fairly believable. The doings of the research station are, also, and the Company is only a small menace in the distance. An invention of Pournelle's I particularly liked is the dogs that the scientists use for personal protection from the wildlife — they've been genetically engineered to be a bit brighter than chimpanzees and to understand a few hundred words of spoken language. They're very nicely done.

Trouble comes when several other companies on Earth try to take over the local Company, making it decide to more fully exploit the planet in order to stay independent. (Happily, the local Company is not automatically portrayed as evil-by-default, but is more troublesome-by-misfortune.)

The importance of the Starswarm is, of course, telegraphed, and the twin *dei ex machinae* of the Starswarms and the boy's AI allow the children to save the day.

I enjoyed the book, but *Citizen of the Galaxy* it's not. It's at the level of *Red Planet*.

Rating: ☆☆☆

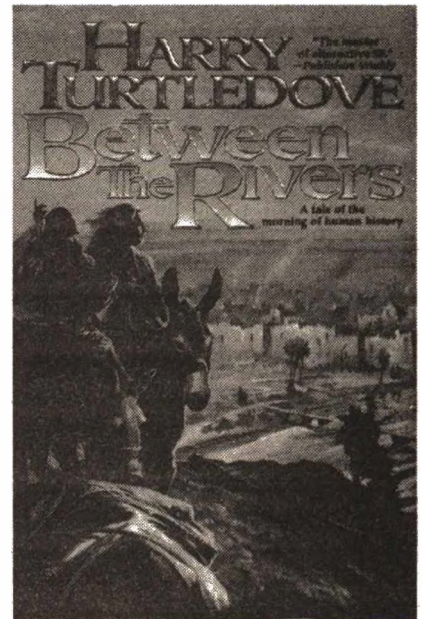
*Between the Rivers*  
By Harry Turtledove  
Tor, 1998  
381 pp., \$24.95

This is a strange one.  
The Land Between the Rivers



could well be ancient Mesopotamia, a well-watered valley of small city-states where the working of bronze is the hot new technology. But there's a difference. The local gods are quite real and frequently come out of their temples and *do things*.

Some towns are ruled directly by their god — a god who, while no smarter than a person, can do *anything*. A god can speak directly to a person's mind, can compel a person to do things, can create, and can destroy. But a god's power is limit-



ed to the region in which he is worshipped, and gods are not omniscient: they can be fooled and can fail to notice things they should have seen.

Some towns are so heavily ruled by their gods that the people in them are little more than puppets. In other towns, the gods rule indirectly through a priesthood. The effect on the people is less drastic, but such a town is still a fairly rot-

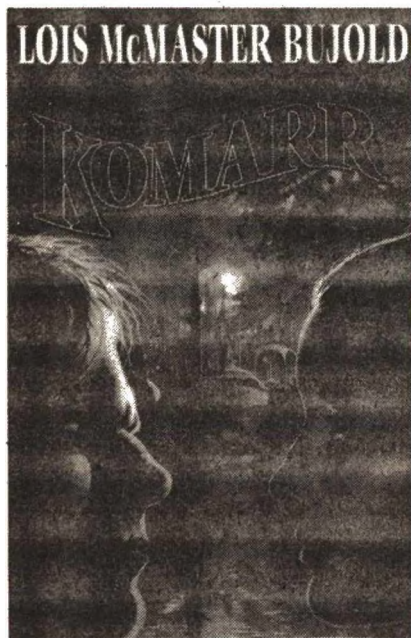
ten place to live. In Gibil, the god is particularly lazy, and as long as the king brings regular gifts, the god is willing to loaf in his temple and let him run Gibil any way he likes.

As a consequence, Gibil is a busy mercantile city, working and exporting bronze and eagerly learning and adapting writing to the needs of business, and hardly bothering with its god at all.

Other gods are disturbed by this — Gibil is prospering compared with the other, god-ridden towns, and the gods fear that Gibil's ways might spread. They declare a blockade against Gibil's merchants and attack with their armies.

The people of Gibil fight back so that men might prosper, hoping the gods will slowly shrink into powerless legends.

Turtledove was careful to write



this so that it could have been our own pre-history here or it could just as well have been a fantasy world. It's an interesting job. He also uses to some effect a quasi-biblical language. People speak in a cadence in which they repeat themselves in different words.

An offbeat fantasy.

Rating: ☆☆☆

*Komarr*

By Lois McMaster Bujold

Baen, 1998  
315 pp., \$22.00

*Komarr* is the latest Miles Vorkosigan novel and takes his story another year. Unfortunately, while enjoyable, it is not up to the standard Bujold set last year with *Memory*.

In *Komarr*, Miles heads off-planet on his first assignment as Imperial Auditor — the investigation of an accident which wrecked the terraforming mirrors around Komarr, the planet his father conquered for Barayyar. As you'd expect, Miles discovers that the accident was not what it seemed and uncovers and thwarts a plot against Barayyar. He also finds love.

The book felt flat to me, however. It didn't seem to have much of a spark to it and was all just a bit too predictable. I expected more to be made of Miles's parentage. Enjoyable, but no more.

Rating: ☆☆ 1/2

*Children of God*  
By Mary Doria Russell  
Villard, 1998  
436 pp., \$23.95

Mary Doria Russell's first book, *The Sparrow*, was one of the best SF novels of the decade. *Children of God* is merely a very good sequel.

*Children of God* follows directly from the first book, both chronologically and in the plot's development. Father Sanchez leaves the Jesuits to marry (written very plausibly and maturely), but is shanghaied back to Rakhat in a spaceship crewed half by the Mafia and half by Jesuits!

Rakhat itself has been greatly changed by the events that the first Jesuit mission inadvertently started: there is an interspecies war with the prey wiping out the predators, while the predators are making a genuine effort to lie down with the lamb.

This was the real strength of this second book. The first book's great strength was the people involved — I came to know them

and like them and care about them. In *Children of God*, however, there were few characters (the embittered Sanchez included) whom I felt that way about.

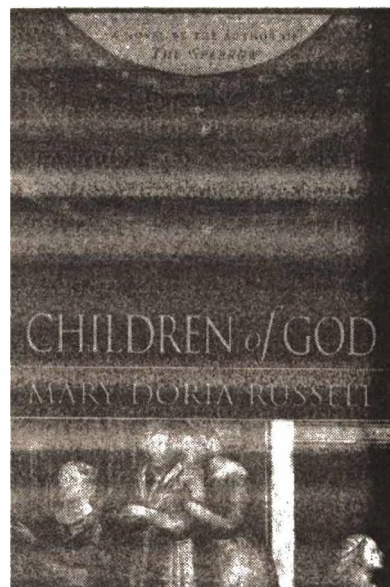
What drove this story was how the two villains of the first book, Supaari and Kitheri, each tried to change their society and had almost succeeded when the revolt of the Ruanja overwhelmed them. It's fine tragedy and wonderful irony. Both are shown as much more complex beings than one might have expected from *The Sparrow*.

The newly added human characters were uninteresting, except for the autistic child, who was simply unbelievable.

It's not as good as the first, but still very good.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

*Island in the Sea of Time*



By S. M. Stirling  
Roc, 1998  
608 pp., \$6.99

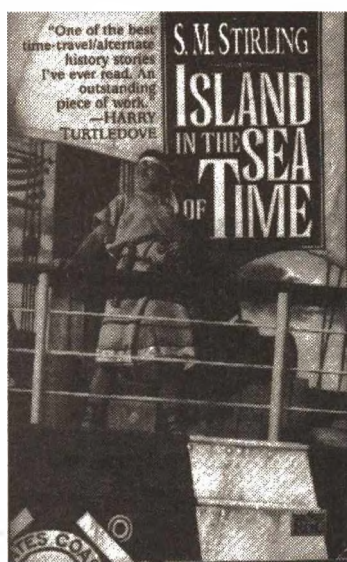
I have a deep fondness for stories about castaways (or survivors of the Atomic Wars) rebuilding civilization — I grew up on *The Mysterious Island* and *Swiss Family Robinson*, after all. At its best, *Island in the Sea of Time* is such a book.

and like them and care about them. In *Children of God*, however, there were few characters (the embittered Sanchez included) whom I felt that way about.

hope they stay unknown in the sequels, too), the island of Nantucket and the 7000 people living on it are transported one night to around 1250 BC. The novel is about how they cope with it.

The Islanders have to secure their food supply (Nantucket today imports nearly all its food) and as much as possible of their technological civilization. The first year is rough, but they manage. Plausibly, too.

Exploration begins early. They quickly make contact with the local Indians and promptly and inadvertently wipe them out with disease (I think it was a little *too* quick to



be plausible, but that's a detail.) They also send their one large sailing ship to England to try to establish trade with the people there — Nantucket needs sheep, horses, cattle, grain, and raw materials.

England is in the throes of the conquest of the people who built Stonehenge by the ancestors of the Celts who were the natives that Julius Caesar met 1200 years later. The Stonehenge people are portrayed as rather matriarchal (but not cultishly so), somewhat peaceful types. The invading Celts being treated historically, too. It's well done and true to archaeology as far as I can tell.

A few Nantucketers get ambitious and hijack several ships and head back to England to create an empire, and the rest follow in force

to beat them — Nantucket can't afford to have a technologically advanced rival, even if the advanced technology is 18th century! The sets up-a sequel.

The battles and maneuvering are overdone and get a bit too much into the military for my taste, but even there, Stirling's usual bloodlust seems under control. I've been put off by many of his previous books due to gratuitous violence which did not in any way advance the story. He has restrained it here and the result is quite a good book.

I wish there had been more — a lot more — on preserving and rebuilding civilization and a bit less fighting, but *Island in the Sea of Time* is definitely a winner.

Rating: ★★★★★

#### *Heaven's Reach*

By David Brin  
Bantam Spectra, 1998  
446 pp., \$24.95

Farmer's Disease is the neurotic need, when wrapping up an SF series, to explain every mystery. Philip José Farmer, of course, suffered grievously from it when he wrote *Gods of Riverworld*, an appalling book that utterly destroyed the superb sense of wonder he'd so successfully built up in the early volumes of the *Riverworld* series.

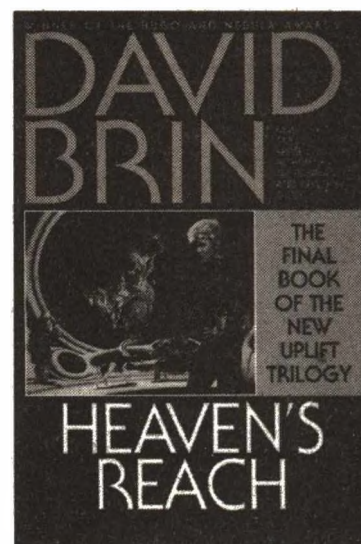
Brin has only a mild case, and there's hope that he will recover.

*Heaven's Reach* is the third and final book (the first two books were *Brightness Reef* and *Infinity's Shore*) of a trilogy set in the Uplift universe. The first two books are mostly set on Jijo, a fallow planet settled illicitly by six different species who all live more or less in peace — very much unlike their cousins in Galactic society.

The story on Jijo is complicated and marvelously inventive. I really enjoyed Jijo and the characters who live there. Unfortunately, Brin chose to bring Galactics into the picture, presumably to introduce the *Streaker* (the dolphin ship from *Startide Rising*) in order to tie up some of the loose ends from *that*

story. In the first two books, I thought that the *Streaker* segments were weaker than the Jijo story. Now, reading the third book, which abandons Jijo to follow the *Streaker's* escape, I'm convinced of it.

I'm not sure that it would have been possible to satisfactorily resolve all the mysteries that Brin has built up around his Uplift universe and the *Streaker*: Just what did the *Streaker* find in the Shallow Cluster, and why did it send every nut-case civilization in the Galaxy into wild action? And why had no one else found it in the last billion years or so? Who were



the hydrogen breathers, and why were they so aloof? Who were the Old Ones, and where did Transcended races go? What brought all the Sooners to Jijo, and how did they remain undetected so long?

Well, Brin answered most of them, and I can't say that any of the resolutions were particularly satisfying. (I was tempted to subtitle this review "There Are Things Man Was Not Meant To Know.")

For example, the whole "Embrace of Tides" explanation is so weak as to be worse than none at all. If you look at it, it's a "Just Because" sort of answer. Granted, it may explain some things, but it's so *entirely* arbitrary it's unsatisfying. (And the equanimity with which the *Streaker's* crew witness-



es the murder of quadrillions of beings — not to mention the *reasons* they were murdered — is a bit hard to accept.)

Brin also should have avoided getting too much into the details of hyperspatial travel. In his previous books, he alluded to numerous ways to beat Einstein. Different ways were used by different races, and none of them were examined too closely. Providing detail only works when the detail *feels* right. It didn't here.

Minor quibbles: we'll ignore the stroke of luck that the Hydrogen breathers operate at the same temperatures as the Oxygen breathers so they can co-exist on the same ship.... The Niss machine, introduced in *Startide Rising*, was on stage a bit too much. It went from being an interesting mystery to a petulant (and not very I) AI. The whole E-space section was pointless — inventive and not uninteresting, I grant, but pointless. It had nothing to do with the rest of the story nor was it hinted at by previous work.

And then finally, can *anyone* believe that when the *Streaker* finally gets back to Earth and, in effect, makes a horrible face at the besieging fleets and goes "Bugga-bugga-boo!" at them they would all instantly flee in panic?

There are some good points. The notion that the Old Ones didn't put aside the petty politics that occupies so much of the Galaxy's time when they went into retirement is reasonable based on what we knew before. And I liked the notion that Earth-based religions promising individual salvation and an individual God might interest Galactics who'd been raised on a pure diet of salvation by species. (But even there I can't bring myself to believe that in a billion years no one would have thought that up for themselves....)

I hope that Brin is disappointed in this also, since I'd hate to think that Farmer's Disease has claimed such a good writer and that we'll never again see anything as good as the superb work we've seen

from him in the past.

Rating: ☆☆

### *Heartfire*

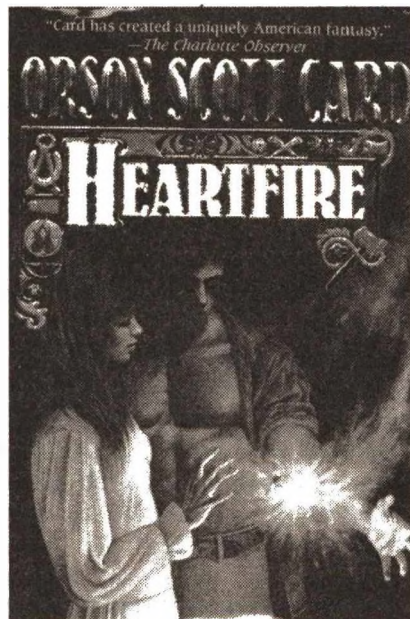
By Orson Scott Card

Tor, 1998

301 pp., \$24.95

Card's *Alvin Maker* series has ranged from great (*Seventh Son*) to merely good (*Alvin Journeyman*). *Heartfire*, I'm happy to report, belongs towards the better end of that range.

The series takes Alvin's life sequentially, beginning with him



as a child and in this book reaching an Alvin who is married, a father-to-be, and the leader of a growing band of followers. Alvin seeks to learn how to build the Crystal City of his visions; his followers don't share his vision, but want only to follow Alvin.

I think Card has taken a very risky path by treating the main problems of early 1800s America in his books. *Red Prophet* (about White-Indian relations) just missed being a tract. *Heartfire* is about slavery and, happily, is good enough that Card's Message does not overwhelm a good novel.

The story is split into two pieces. Alvin and his followers are in Cambridge in New England, a Puritan Republic, while Alvin's

wife Peggy is in Camelot, the capital of the southern seaboard states. A powerful seer, Peggy, is trying to end slavery, which she foresees leading to a great war.

New England is one of Card's better creations. He resists the cheap characterization of the Puritans as bigoted fools and instead shows the New England that they had tried to found: a godly land of peace and harmony. That's not to say there isn't strife, and much of the story centers around the tattered remnants of the witch hunting of Salem fame.

Few people in New England still believe that witches should be hunted and killed, but the laws against witches are still on the books, and some twisted individuals are still witch hunters. Of course, in Card's universe, witches with powers *do* exist, though they're just people who exercise the magical knacks everyone has in this world. Because of the witch laws, no one in New England (or Old England, either, still ruled by Cromwell's Commonwealth) dares publicly practice their knacks.

Alvin and his followers are eager to destroy the witchcraft laws, and after being accused of witchcraft, Alvin allows himself to be imprisoned and tried. Alvin's lawyer, Verity Cooper, plans a clever legal defense and offers the judge a chance to throw out the witchcraft laws, but Alvin stops him, arguing that it's not appropriate for a judge to make the law. The judge, an elderly John Adams, agrees, but comes up with his own way to render the witchcraft laws void.

(I thought this was weak, because Adams's ploy is every bit as much an extraordinary exercise of judicial law-making as that condemned by Alvin, yet it goes unchallenged. I don't think Card is being consistent here.)

The character of John Adams is one of the high points of the book. He's portrayed as a man of high principle and strong character whose main regret is that he might have worked with Thomas

Jefferson (who Adams thinks turned into a hypocritical radical when he might have been a great statesman) to forge a democratic nation in North America.

It's a pleasant antidote to the nasty character given Daniel Webster in the previous book.

Meanwhile, Alvin's wife Peggy is in Camelot (Charleston, SC, I believe) trying to get the South moving toward emancipation. Her

aim is to fan the abolitionist sentiment she expects to find among the upper class into a true movement to end slavery, but she discovers only hypocrisy. Alvin's powerful and errant brother Calvin is also in Camelot, stumbles onto secretive slave magic and accidentally triggers a slave revolt. Alvin races south in an attempt to save the day.

The entire *Alvin Maker* series

has succeeded because it's believable. Card populates it with believable people, the magic that happens seems natural, and even the rather drastically altered history has a plausibility that some more labored and realistic alternate histories lack.

Rating: ★★★ 1/2



## Allen Publisher

Continued from Page 3

to be many other modern touchstones. Therefore, after massive research conducted over three weekends at the mall, I have determined my first chart of the true continuity of modern human culture, as follows:

(THE TOP)

X Leonardo DiCaprio

x TV shows about angels

x LeAnn Rimes records

x Taco Bell commercials with that Chihuahua

x Semen-stained dresses

x The IRS

X Computer Spam

(THE PITS)

While I realize the above might be somewhat incomplete (already I can hear some of you muttering "Where would 'swing dancing' appear on that chart? And how about Colonel Sanders?", it is at least a start, a point from which we might be able to begin our appreciation of all that is human.

And what does it mean? While this survey is far from definitive, I believe we can make some basic assumptions. Just as Spam makes everything worse, the opposite of Spam — Leonardo DiCaprio — should enhance anything he might come in contact with. (Proof of this theory is easy enough. Take some recent cul-

tural event, say that incomprehensible *Godzilla* film of a few months back. How much better that film would have been if *Godzilla* had been forced to fight a 50-foot high Leonardo DiCaprio! Obviously, you see my point.)

Finally, my true understanding of Earth culture has begun.

Oops! I have gotten carried away. Perhaps, by mentioning Leonardo DiCaprio, I have made the above too interesting and people are beginning to read it once more.

Time for more Spamiosity. For what would Spam be without —

### TESTIMONIALS.

"I NEVER BELIEVED THAT LIFE COULD BE SO — I SIMPLY CAN'T FIND WORDS TO EXPRESS — I MEAN — HOW COULD YOU POSSIBLY — ESPECIALLY CONCERNING THE HUGE — DO YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN?"

—John Q. Unclear

"GABBA GABBA HEY, GABBA GABBA HEY, GABBA GABBA HEY, GABBA GABBA HEY. AND, DID I MENTION, GABBA GABBA HEY?"

—John Q. Nottheramones

"NOTHING HAS EVER MADE SO MUCH SENSE AS THE ABOVE PLAN. AND I SHOULD KNOW! WHY, I COULD BE ONE OF THE

WORLD'S GREAT MILITARY DICTATORS IF I WEREN'T ALREADY DEAD."

—Benito Mussolini

Speaking of Spamiosity, I almost forgot the Convuluted Directions:

IT CAN ALL BE YOURS! TAKE ALL THE MONEY YOU CAN CHARGE ON YOUR CREDIT CARDS, AND SEND IT TO THE FOLLOWING ADDRESSES. IN RETURN, EACH ONE WILL GIVE YOU A BADLY PRINTED PIECE OF PAPER, THE PRODUCT FOR WHICH YOU HAVE SPENT YOUR LIFE SAVINGS. SEND THE FIRST BAG OF MONEY TO THE FIRST ADDRESS BELOW, THE SECOND BAG OF MONEY TO THE SECOND, THE DEED TO YOUR HOUSE TO THE THIRD, ETC.

1. MANNY THE MECHANIC

2. RIPUOFF PRODUCTS

THE BIG HOUSE

RFD 23

SING SING, NY

NOWHERE, NJ

3. CHAIN LETTERS R US

3833 CELESTIAL PATH BOULEVARD

SOMEWHERE IN INDONESIA

Enough of this subterfuge! My true studies have begun. Even though it is not readily apparent, Spam must have its place — and its value. And I will not leave this planet until I find it!



# Cutting Edges and Other Sharp Surfaces, or, On Being a Science-Fictional Dinosaur



**W**e critics have our dark nights of the soul. I suppose it's a sign of middle age. Here I am, closing in on the awesomely advanced age of 46. I still have all my hair. I can still do just about anything I could when I was twenty. When I was lugging a couple of armloads of books about at a book sale the other week, the lady in charge — who could have been my grandmother — said to me, "Son, you're going to have to get a bigger box." But such things are superficial. What matters is what goes on in the brain.

I've been reviewing books since about 1969. I have had a column somewhere since 1976. I've had a column *here* since 1986, when *Aboriginal* began.

Every once in a while any reviewer or critic, if he's honest, must ask whether or not he's beginning to lose it. I start to note that the younger readers (such as there still *are* younger readers in SF, but that is the subject of a whole other column) are really excited over certain Hot New Writers, the same way members of my generation were excited over Disch or Delany or Zelazny back around 1968, and I can't myself see what the excitement is about. I confess that what set me on this immediate course of self-examination was my total defeat at the hands of Greg Egan's *Permutation*

*City*, allegedly a Hot New Book, indeed, by a Hot New Writer who is being published in all the best places, nominated for awards, etc., etc. The book came up as a topic for the Philadelphia Science Fiction Society's discussion group. I welcomed it as a chance to try out a newer writer whose works I had so far failed to read (the other deep dark secret about being a reviewer is that so much of your reading is scheduled that it's hard to squeeze in an extra book, unless you read as fast as Don D'Ammassa).

But I found the Egan book impenetrable. I gave up after about 80 pages, and, upon listening to the discussion, I concluded that I had comprehended close to nothing of the text. Not that anybody else found it easy going either. Those who liked it tended to be the unliterary/*Analog* types who admitted that they didn't care how badly written the book was as long as the scientific ideas were interesting. Yes, some of those ideas sounded interesting, I thought. Somebody ought to write an intelligible novel about them, something with characters and narrative flow, rather than turgid, neo-Gernsbackian glop. (A technical term.)

At the same time I have to wonder if there is something that was slipped into the gene pool about 1970 which completely alters the way a reader perceives fiction, the same way something was slipped in about then that enabled kids born to such things to play video games in a way I simply cannot. The video-game analogy may be

the right one. Mere instructions aren't enough. There's always something as-sumed, which I don't know. It doesn't suffice merely to say what key to press. It's a matter of *how* and *when* and the ability to perceive how and when. Then you're expected to know what the object of the game is, how to manipulate the figures on the screen — a skill as distinct as riding a bicycle — and when it comes to video games, I give up, and gladly yield the machine to a twelve-year-old.

But when it comes to reading, I refuse to give up so easily. I will not accept that times are changing so fast that literary values have been totally transformed in ten or even twenty years. If so, we might as well accept the death of literature right now. If everything from Homer onward has become obsolete that quickly, how long do we expect the current, trendy stuff to hold up? Five years? Things *are* moving faster now. A generation ago, any established science fiction writer was pretty much set for life. Now it is tragically possible for even respected figures to outlive their careers. But that is more a matter of market forces than literary or cultural ones, and, again, the subject for a whole other column.

"In my day, sonny," I say in my best old-timer's cackle, "we read Zelazny and Lafferty and Bester scratched into the shoulder-blades of mastadons and *liked it . . .*"

But there's a letter in the new *Science Fiction Chronicle* suggesting that most kids today find sci-

## Rating System

☆☆☆☆☆	Outstanding
☆☆☆☆	Very Good
☆☆☆	Good
☆☆	Fair
☆	Poor

Copyright © 1998 by Darrell Schweitzer

ence fiction more than twenty years old to be unreadable.

Is this really so? If so, then I foresee the end of the field and pity the kids in their cultural impoverishment. If they can't read Philip Dick and Walter M. Miller and Edgar Pangborn and Alfred Bester, then it is not they who are onto something. It is they who are losing out. One wonders what they would make of Tolstoy or Shakespeare?

At the same time, I remember how it was when I was a teen-aged fan. I didn't always respect the works my elders considered to be great classics. But, I would argue now, there was a difference. I was a teen-ager in the '60s. Many of those alleged classics were from the '30s, which was the tail end of the Great Retarded Period of pulp SF, when science fiction was pretty much subliterate and subliterate. If you're trying to impress the younger generation with E.E. Smith, Stanton Coblenz, and Ray Cummings, maybe that's not going to work. Standards *did* rise sharply from the 1940s onward. But if you're holding up as a standard of literary excellence, say, Keith Roberts's *Pavane* or Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, or Pangborn's *Davy* or anything by Fritz Leiber, I think that's a defensible position and don't see any reason to back down.

From the '30s to the '60s, science fiction was clearly advancing, in terms of complexity, maturity of themes, technical excellence, etc. But since then, not all change has necessarily been progress.

My take on Greg Egan is that I must read more of his work before dismissing him, but that in *Permutation City* he was reinventing the wheel, badly, having discarded just about every narrative technique and expository device introduced into our field since early Heinlein, which he should study, to see how to make a complex future world comprehensible.

So I won't admit to being a dinosaur after all. A curmudgeonly Giant Ground Sloth, maybe ...

*The Dreams Our Stuff Is Made Of*

By Thomas M. Disch  
The Free Press (an imprint of Simon & Schuster), 1998  
256 pp., \$25.00

Subtitled "How Science Fiction Conquered the World," this latest non-fiction item from Tom Disch suggests that he isn't entirely at ease with the state of science fiction today either.

This book is a polemic, not a work of scholarship, so Disch might argue that it's unfair of me to hold him to the facts. But then, I write these columns with reference books at hand, and hold *myself* to the facts, so let me be maybe a little unfair. Or at least only marginally relevant. I jotted down a long list of Disch's mistakes. They do not necessarily cripple his thesis.

Here are some of them: Errors come thick and fast in the chapter on women in SF. C.L. Moore and Judith Merrill did not "crash the party" as spouses or under male pseudonyms. Moore used her real initials (Catherine Lucille) to hide her extra source of income from her boss. She wasn't married when she began to publish. Merrill used her own name for all her science fiction, except when collaborating with C.M. Kornbluth, when the two became "Cyril Judd." Actually the *first* women in the science fiction magazines did not use pseudonyms either. As for the marital status of Claire Winger Harris, Sophie Wenzel Ellis, Mary Elizabeth Counselman, and others Disch has clearly never heard of, I haven't a clue. But female bylines appeared regularly in the Gernsback magazines, also in the Clayton *Astounding*. That early female SF writers were only welcome (under whatever byline) if they met male standards is a more

defensible thesis, but that's not what Disch is saying. He clearly knows very little about the field prior to his involvement in it.

On page 158 there's a very odd comment about Philip Dick, suggesting that Disch doesn't know that Dick *did* struggle very hard to be a mainstream writer, but couldn't sell such work.

Disch also repeats the old canard that Valentine Michael Smith was Charles Manson's role model. Not so. Heinlein was so upset about this that he hired a lawyer to interview Manson in prison and found that Manson was virtually illiterate and had read few books. (The real Heinlein-Manson connection is revealed in *Grumbles from the Grave*. Heinlein got a fan letter from one of Manson's women.) That Manson might have taken *Stranger in a Strange Land* to heart if he'd read it, or even if one of his followers had told him about it at length, is perhaps arguable, but that's, again, not what Disch says.

Lots more: p. 194: *Ender's Game* was not Orson Scott Card's first novel (although the short-story version was his first published story). p. 223: Disch confuses Edmond Hamilton and Jack Williamson, and misspells the name of the former. It was Williamson who went from the pulps to academe, not Hamilton. Same page: Delany's age and dates are wrong. Etc., etc.

But let's get to the heart of the matter. After a cursory history of the field, an attempt to supplant Mary Shelley with Edgar Allan Poe as science fiction's progenitor, and some illuminating anecdotes, Disch's thesis is that science fiction has now so pervaded our culture as to become the norm, and this is not necessarily for the better. (And, lest he be accused of being a literary snob looking down his nose at all this, he clearly identifies himself as a science fiction writer.) I was particularly

intrigued by his chapter on religion, as I had explored some of the same ground in an essay of my own, "The Necessity of Skepticism." Here, Disch suggests that science fiction is riding on, and contributing to, the wave of credulity which could well plunge us all into a new dark age. He has much to say about L. Ron Hubbard and Whitley Streiber as frauds and cult leaders, but his ignorance of pre-Dischian SF weakens his thesis. He doesn't mention the *third* spectacular example of the same phenomenon, Richard Shaver, who illustrated this dangerous tendency in the mid-'40s.

The chapters on *Star Trek* and other media Sci Fi (including books) are of considerable interest, Disch describes such material as conservative comfort fiction, antithetical to the intellectually adventurous spirit of real science fiction.

His view of the future of SF is not a rosy one: corporate sameness, generic formula fiction, endless television and book series reinforcing social orthodoxy.

I am reminded of something somebody said in one of my innumerable interviews (was it Fred Pohl?), that we will know that America has become a totalitarian state and our freedoms are gone when they start to ban science fiction, because science fiction is inherently subversive and prone to asking challenging questions. But what Disch has (despite many factual lapses) convincingly shown is the evolution of that subversive SF into the much tamer Sci Fi, which any dictator could find useful.

Read this. It's disturbing.

Rating: ★★★★★

*Girl in Landscape*

By Jonathan Lethem

Doubleday, 1998

298 pp., \$22.95

Pretending that a science-fiction

writer isn't a science-fiction writer has been a valid marketing strategy for decades. It worked for Kurt Vonnegut and made him rich. It worked, to a large degree, for Walter Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, for James Morrow at the beginning of his career, and even, to some extent, for Ray Bradbury. The idea is that if the book contains sufficient disclaimers, it will be reviewed as mainstream book, be distributed as a mainstream book, and sell like a mainstream book.

The advantage of this approach is that the author has (particularly among Seri-Lit critics) a completely naive audience that has never knowingly read a genre book, for whom the wheel may be confidently reinvented.

The disadvantage is that the book may get great reviews, miss both the mainstream and SF audiences, and sink without a trace. (As James Morrow explains in a *Locus* interview, his first few books would have done so had he not been rescued by the Science Fiction Book Club.)

So far it seems to be working for Lethem. He's getting the reviews. There are comparisons to Don DeLillo and Jane Smiley. We are told he is "opening up blue sky for American fiction," that he is "twisting forms and literary conventions to create a dazzling, completely unconventional tale which simultaneously manages to amaze and move the reader."

Well, don't you believe it. This is a science fiction novel. It is not a very good one. It is entirely too long, and contains nothing, aside from a few bits of profanity and descriptions of bodily functions (and a couple of offstage lesbian characters) that couldn't have been done much better as an 8000-word novelette by Jack Vance or Leigh Brackett in *Startling Stories* in 1952, or at slightly greater length as the short side of an Ace Double.

The first thing you notice is

that Lethem actually writes well. His prose is smooth. His opening chapters are a very good description of children growing up on a future Earth that has completely lost its ozone layer, so that a trip outside is a deadly peril. But, so they won't forget, the mother takes the kids (suitably protected) to visit the ruins of Coney Island. They find a blackened corpse on the beach. Later, the mother has a seizure and dies of a brain tumor. The father, a failed politician, moves the family to another planet.

And the book goes downhill rapidly from there into a simplified, Bradburyesque western, like *The Martian Chronicles*, without the poetry or passion. But for a couple of indigenous lifeforms, the planet is rather like the American frontier. Settlers are apparently just dumped there, at a technological level well below that of the late 20th century, without any government; but somebody pays for this and it's possible to transport all sorts of things from Earth: trucks, bicycles, old keepsakes, etc. A kid has a ragged comic book rolled up in his pocket. (p.83) If that book was sent from Earth, it should be a priceless treasure. If printed locally . . . well, there's no indication that these sobbusters can support throw-away printing.

The science-fictional premise, which has some potential, is the one used in John W. Campbell's "Forgetfulness" (1937). The natives of this world achieved scientific marvels. Then they went away and left their cities to crumble, and the few individuals left seem to have totally forgotten civilization. Unfortunately, Lethem does very little with this. No answers are ever provided. The narrative is flaccid. There's very little narrative tension. Whole chapters accomplish nothing. I was neither moved nor amazed. The ending is particularly unsatisfactory. The sum of the whole thing is shrug, rather like what

George Alec Effinger produced, more intentionally, I suspect, in "And Us, Too, I Guess" (1973) in which another classic SF trope (the end of the world) similarly fades into a Vonnegutian "so it goes."

Only a *Newsweek* reviewer could think this is cutting-edge. For the rest of us it is the exhaustion of the familiar, well enough written that I managed to finish it, but not, I hope, an indication of the direction of Lethem's career.

He's another one of those writers I want to get back to. I should read at least *Gun, With Occasional Music* and his story collection *The Wall of the Sky, The Wall of the Eye* before making any overall judgment.

But do not start reading Lethem with *Girl in Landscape*.

Rating: ☆

*The Tooth Fairy*

By Graham Joyce

Tor, 1998

320 pp., \$22.95

Graham Joyce is a hot British writer who has begun to win awards. He comes to us recommended by Jonathan Carroll, Karen Joy Fowler, and Jonathan Lethem, among others. He's got a great reputation.

I guess I am going to have to turn curmudgeon yet again when I admit that I didn't enjoy this one as much as I was clearly supposed to. It's a pretty good fantasy/horror novel on the premise of *Drop Dead, Fred* or "Thus I Refute Beelzy." One kid can see the Tooth Fairy, a nasty imp like something out of a Terry Gilliam movie, who makes life difficult, killing a bully, pulling the kid's penis out in church, etc. The story moves at a lively pace as the critter switches genders and welcomes the boy into sexual awakening. The situations are inventive. Come to think of it, this *would* make a good Terry Gilliam movie, where the acting and direction might make up for

what the book lacks. I was somehow not horrified by *The Tooth Fairy*, nor really moved. Not passionate enough, not quite lyrical.

Still, here's a writer to watch. Look for his first book published in the U.S., *Requiem*.

Rating: ☆☆☆

*Jack Faust*

By Michael Swanwick

Avon, 1997

337 pp., \$23.00

I voted for this for the Hugo this year. It is Michael Swanwick's best book by far. It has very strong narrative structure, where some of his earlier novels tended to ramble. It is also compulsively readable, something you will go roaring through, then want to reread more carefully because there's actually quite a lot in it.

The story of Faust and Mephistopheles is not science fiction in itself, but provides one of the central metaphors of science fiction, because science fiction is so often about knowledge and its consequences. Swanwick brings it a bit closer to SF by making his "devil" a manifestation of aliens from another continuum, a kind of hive mind composed of individuals who live only nanoseconds but whose intellect is enormously evolved. Doc Smith would have been proud of that, but he wouldn't have done what Swanwick does with the premise, you can be sure ....

The alien starts giving Faust tremendous scientific knowledge and the wherewithal to work miracles. Faust, in his pride, is damned from the start. He thinks he can handle it. He begins to remake the world. The novel turns into a unique alternate history, in which all the progress of the past 400 years is compressed into a couple of decades following 1500. The ending is very dark. The alien's motive, from the start, has been sheer malevolence. Faust thought he could handle that too.

It's hard to summarize the rich-

ness of this book in the space of a review. It's as erudite as Avram Davidson or James Branch Cabell, but with a power and terrible irony all its own.

Read it, and be reassured that as long as our genre can produce works like this, it is not yet a wasteland of Sci Fi.

(The publisher has, incidentally, tried to push this as a mainstream novel, but at the same time positioned it so the SF audience will find it. Good for everybody.)

Rating: ☆☆☆☆☆

Noted:

*His Share of Glory*

The Complete Short Science

Fiction of C.M. Kornbluth

NESFA Press, 1997

670 pp., \$27.00

This huge, well-made, modestly-priced volume is yet another in a series of worthy compilations put out by NESFA Press. Now that media Sci Fi has taken over more than half of the commercial science fiction market (51% of all category books in 1997 were media tie-ins, quoth *Locus*), we are, as we were in the late '40s, dependent on specialty presses for much of the real substance in our field.

And this is a book those Cutting Edge, Hot New Writer whipper-snappers ought to read. The mature Kornbluth, in short lengths at least, was everything a science fiction writer ought to be: inventive, incisive, unconventional, a serious artist. He could also teach a lot of newer writers a few things about form, about how to get maximum impact in a small space. Stories like "The Altar at Midnight" should be used in writing courses. Even some of the earlier stories, written when Kornbluth was a teenager, are surprisingly good.

But he never quite made it as a novelist. There were few opportu-

nities for science fiction novelists in his generation. He has since largely been overshadowed by his collaborations with Frederik Pohl (especially *The Space Merchants*). So, here is something you will not find in mass-market paperback, perhaps ever again.

Thanks to NESFA we can still rediscover such writers. (NESFA Press, P.O. Box 809, Framingham MA 01701-0203).

Rating: ★★★★★

*Tales from the Texas Woods*  
By Michael Moorcock  
Mojo Press, 1997  
158 pp., \$20.95

Here's an oddity I picked up at the Worldcon. I didn't know it existed. I doubt you did either. It's a volume of what at first appear to be westerns — or western-inspired fiction — by Michael Moorcock, who is, as most of you know, English. But he's always had a fascination with the American West, both as a place and as a mythology. Long before he really knew anything about it (as a teen-ager), he was writing western stories professionally, for British boys' publications. (One such specimen is reprinted here.)

The first story promises much: "The Ghost Warriors, a previously unpublished story of the Masked Buckaroo." Moorcock's long-time readers know he has got to be kidding, and we settle in for amusing, deliberately neo-pulp satire, and almost get it, before the whole thing becomes yet another meta-physical fantasy in which the Eternal Champion a.k.a. Von Bek, a.k.a. Elric explains the Meaning of It All again. I much preferred Moorcock's very competent Sherlock Holmes pastiche, "The Adventure of the Texan's Honour." The rest of the volume is a miscellany of fiction and non-fiction, not necessarily about the West. An introduction to Fritz Leiber says all the right things, includes vivid anecdotes, and makes embarrassing factual errors. (Don Wollheim

published Burroughs, but never *A Princess of Mars*; "Adept's Gambit" is in *Night's Black Agents*; spelling: Cele Lalli, Judith Merril, Lin Carter.) There are a couple of reviews, a memoir of Moorcock's days writing for comic books, etc. (Mojo Press, P.O. Box 140005, Austin TX 78714.)

Rating: ★★★

*The Complete Pegana*  
By Lord Dunsany  
Edited by S.T. Joshi  
Chaosium, 1998  
240 pp., trade paperback, \$12.95

This is a real triumph, the first time in almost a generation that the great short fantasies of the greatest writer of short fantasies ever have been in print. A Dunsany story is like a sip of rare wine compared to the generic fantasy trilogy, which is more a five-gallon jug of flat diet soda. In one volume Joshi has collected *The Gods of Pegana* (1905), *Time and the Gods* (1906), and the story-cycle "Beyond the Fields We Know." The first volume was a landmark in literary history, the

first time *ever* that someone invented a new theogeny. The book reads a little like the bible of an alien religion, its prose endlessly rereadable, like first-rate lyric poetry.

H.P. Lovecraft extravagantly admired Dunsany, and might not have quite understood the irony that this writer, whom he looked up to as a master, is now published by Chaosium as "Call of Cthulhu Fiction," as a Lovecraft tie-in. But Lovecraft seems to be wrapping weird fiction around himself the way Shakespeare did Elizabethan theater. We remember Marlowe or Beaumont & Fletcher because they were contemporaries of Shakespeare. Now it seems we will remember Machen, Blackwood, Chambers, and even Dunsany because of their relationship to Lovecraft.

Which is better than not remembering them at all.

Rating: ★★★★★



## Moving?

If you plan to move in the next three months, please be sure to let us know your change of address, as the U.S Postal Service will not forward 2nd class mail more than four weeks after a move.

## A full set of *Aboriginal SF*

We have a very limited number of full sets (issues 1-58) of *Aboriginal SF* available on a first come, first served basis. (Issues 1-28 are single issues; 29-54 are double issues [96 pages].) These full sets include copies of "sold out" issues (we only have 10 copies of issue #45-46 left!).

Because they are so limited, we must charge \$260 for each set, including shipping.

To order, send your check or money order to:

**Aboriginal SF Full Sets**  
P.O. Box 2449  
Woburn, MA 01888-0849

# Wedding Bells



I am sorry to have to break the news to female *Aboriginal* fans, but **Larry Blamire** — the long-time *Aboriginal* artist, handsome actor, talented playwright and dedicated bachelor — is no longer available. When I spoke to him in September he had just returned from his honeymoon in Kauai with his beautiful bride **Jennifer**. She is an actor as well, and the two tied the knot at her parents' home on

brief letter sent to our alien publisher I have surmised only that J. Brooke does or did at one time live in La Jolla, California, has some kind of degree in physics, and hasn't had a picture taken since the sixth grade. And that's all he/she has volunteered.

The other mystery author is **B. McLaren**, who wrote "Angel with a Stainless-Steel Soul," a dark tale of a drug underworld that traffics in human

latest author to join. The address is: [www.iplus.zetnet.co.uk](http://www.iplus.zetnet.co.uk).

Brooke happens to be friends with **Eric Brown**, who is the author of "Venus Macabre" in this issue. The two began writing together three years ago, and have a collection of short stories coming out with Tanjen Publishers in May 1999 titled *Parallax View*.

"The Domegame" is illustrated by **Alan Gutierrez**, whom I spoke to under



**Larry Blamire**

Massachusetts's North Shore after a year-long courtship. *Aboriginal* artist Cortney Skinner was the best man. Congratulations and champagne all around!

Blamire has lent his unique and hilarious style to nearly every *Aboriginal* issue since our beginning. In this issue he illustrates "The E-Ticket" by **J. Brooke**, a satire about our ambivalent attitude toward violence (and tourists).

Brooke is the author of "E.R." in *Aboriginal* No. 39/40. Usually our authors are more than happy to talk about themselves. That's not the case for two of the authors in this issue. From a

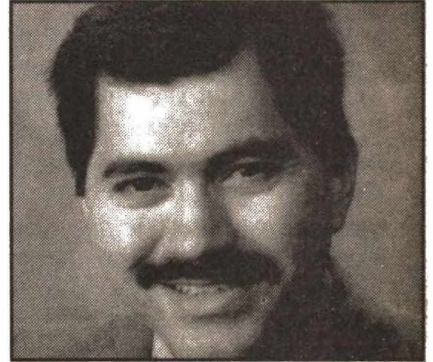


**Keith Brooke**

beings. I can tell you even less about McLaren.

"Angel" is illustrated by **Jon Foster** who has lately been working with artist **Rick Berry** in Berry's Massachusetts studio and learning from him, "almost like an apprenticeship." Foster has been continuing his gaming work, including illustrating the popular new TSR role-playing SF game "Alternity." He recently attended a "huge" comic book convention in San Diego. There he got his picture taken with costumed fans and several women of comic-book proportions who were paid to wear extremely skimpy costumes, otherwise known as "booth babes."

Human gamecocks are the center of attention in "The Domegame and Mr. P." by **Keith Brooke** (no relation to J.). Brooke, who is from the UK, wrote "Hot Rider" for *Aboriginal SF* no. 30 and is one of *Interzone* magazine's most frequent contributors. He has been running a web site for a year now called "Infinity Plus," which features the work of about 50 writers. It republishes a lot of short fiction, excerpts forthcoming novels, and posts interviews and reviews. He says it started as a collective home page for a few authors and has grown into one of the main sites for SF on the net. Michael Moorcock is the



**Alan Gutierrez**

sad circumstances, just days after his father had passed away. The Arizona artist is one of the artists working on the "Sovereign Stone" role-playing game written by Don Perrin. He recently did a book cover for TSR's Forgotten Realms line, for a book called *Dream Spheres*.

"Venus Macabre" is a story about the ultimate performance artist. Brown wrote "Skyball" in our issue no. 53/54, and has the novels *Meridian Days* and *Enginemen* and two short-story collections to his credit. This coming spring he has the SF novel *Penumbra*, and a young adult SF book, *Walkabout*, both being published by Orion. Look for his

Copyright © 1998 by Laurel Lucas



**Jon Foster**



**Eric Brown**





**Jael**

short stories in an upcoming *SF Age* and the DAW anthology *Moonshots*.

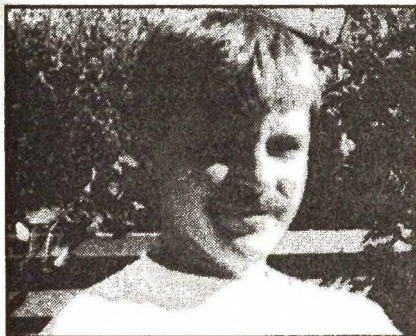
"Venus Macabre" is illustrated by **Jael**. When I spoke to her she was preparing for two big guest of honor appearances in October, the first at *Viable Paradise II* in Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, and the second at *Albacon '98*, "Hamsters over Schenectady." In honor of that theme, Jael has created a series of "Hamzilla" paintings, as she calls them. Jael and her boyfriend/husband **Dusty**, both avid bikers (the Harley variety) had just come back from a bike trip to Whiteface Mountain, beyond Lake Placid, and some whitewater rafting in Ausable Gorge.

This past summer some friends of mine gave me a tour of their neighborhood and referred to the reclusive occupant of a rundown shack as "the Unabomber." My friends might get uneasy reading "Watching Maynard" by **Stephen Wallenfels**.

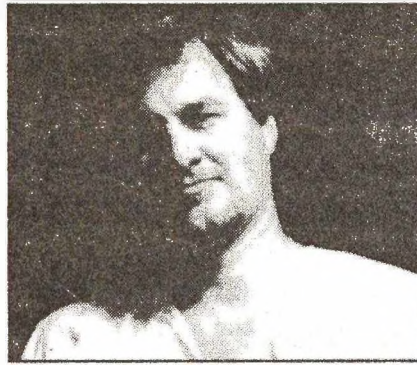
Wallenfels's first SF sale earned him a semifinalist award in the L. Ron Hubbard's Writers of the Future Contest. This year he also received first place in a juvenile fiction writing contest. His first professional sale was four years ago to *National Racquetball Magazine*, and he has some humorous essays about business being published in *CBI Magazine* in November. When I commented about all the different writing genres, he laughed and said he was "searching for my voice."

Wallenfels is an athletic director of a large health club and likes tennis, racquetball, and rock climbing.

"Watching Maynard" is illustrated



**Stephen Wallenfels**



**David LeClerc**

by **David LeClerc**, who used a former next-door neighbor as his model. He says his former neighborhood was much like the one depicted: rural Ohio, ranch style houses, all the shades drawn ... LeClerc has been trying to create some web sites, working in acrylic media, and doing paintings of dragons. He is also preparing some work for the Terror Fantasies Art Show his buddies **Charles and Wendy Snow-Lang** and a half-dozen other artists put on annually in Salem, Massachusetts in October.

Alternate worlds and irrepressible talent are the subject of "Lou's Seventh Cylinder" by **Marc Levinthal**. Levinthal is an L.A.-based musician/writer who likes his stories and his music on the dark side. He has a CD out called *Dimetrodon Collective Volume One*. Paula Guran of *DarkEcho* says, "Levinthal's ambient electronic soundscapes on *Dimetrodon* tend to set up a mood of deceptive tranquility that he then invades with disturbing dissonance." Levinthal plays guitar in several bands, including The Torture Chamber Ensemble. His recent fiction includes "Trainslapper" in *Eros Ex Machina*, from Rhinoceros Press, and "Kids" in *Mondo Zombie*, from Obsidian Books.

"Lou's Seventh Cylinder" is illustrated by **Lubov**, a St. Petersburg native who was strongly influenced at a young age by Russian realists and folk artists. The Art Institute of Chicago graduate tells me she is working in the fine art market doing lots of shows, and she has some prints that are soon to be published.



**Marc Levinthal**



**Peggy Ranson**

"Going with Fergus" by **Carroll Brown** is the story of an alien species endangered by the rapaciousness of humans. This is Brown's second fiction sale: his first was to *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. Recently his work has appeared in several magazines, and he is also the review editor for *Adventures of Swords and Sorcery*. A couple of years ago Brown had a screenplay produced as a feature film by an independent production company in Los Angeles, and it played at film festivals across Europe and the U.S. to good notices.

"Going with Fergus" is illustrated by **Peggy Ranson**. The New Orleans resident has been bumped up to creative director at her ad agency. When I called her a couple of months after her promotion she had already been through the crash of a freighter into a New Orleans pier, a Superbowl celebration, and preparations for Mardi Gras. Things are never boring in that city.

Our cover is another character from a classic SF novel brought to life by artist **David Deitrick**. His "Barlennan" sculpture from Hal Clement's *Mission of Gravity* graced the cover of issue no. 53/54. This time it's a "Motie Warrior" from **Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle's** 1970s award-winning novel *The Mote in God's Eye*, which Deitrick says he has read four or five times over the years. Deitrick likes to sculpt, and says these days he's been enjoying going back and rereading his favorite SF books of years ago. So expect another sculpture cover on an upcoming issue of *Aboriginal SF*. □



**David Deitrick & Family**

## A Changing of the Guard



Welcome to the Fall 1998 issue of *Aboriginal Science Fiction*. If that contradicts what's on the cover it's because we — as in DNA Publications and The 2nd Renaissance Foundation Inc. — decided to call this fall issue the Winter issue in order to get all four magazines in synch.

If you missed the note in the last issue, *Aboriginal* has entered into a management contract with DNA Publications. It will perform all of the publishing, subscription, and business work for *Aboriginal*, leaving us to perform the editorial functions.

DNA publishes *Absolute Magnitude*, *Dreams of Decadence*, and *Weird Tales*, which is the oldest genre magazine in the field (it's older than *Amazing* by two years). To make the publication of all four magazines simpler, the decision was made to get all of their cover dates into line, hence this fall, all four magazines will bring out their winter issues.

Because of the management change, all change of address notes, renewals, new or gift subscriptions, and questions about subscriptions should now go to the DNA address:

DNA Publications  
P.O. Box 2988  
Radford, VA 24143-2988

If you have an urgent question or problem, or would like to place an ad, the DNA telephone number is 1-540-633-2220; the fax number is 1-540-633-0989.

Letters to the editor and any editorial questions or comments should still come to us at our regular address: *Aboriginal Science Fiction*, P.O. Box 2449, Woburn, MA 01889.

Likewise, any book orders, or back issue orders should come to us at the magazine, at least until we can transfer enough material to the Virginia headquarters.

### Interior color

As you may have noticed we returned to a glossy cover with the summer issue and expect to continue to keep the glossy cover.

We also hope to include some interior color. In fact we had hoped to include some in our last issue, but time got short and we had to ship the issue before we could square away all of the technical details with the new printer. We also did not have the time at our end to generate the additional four-color negatives which would have been necessary.

We still hope to return to using color inside the magazine, but it will take a little bit of time, to get everything in place for that.

Maybe with the next issue, the first issue of 1999.

### Big bangs

Two of the popular SF movies that hit the screens this spring and summer played with the notion that the Earth might be hit in the near future by a massive comet or asteroid. *Deep Impact* hit us with a comet, and

*Armageddon* belted us with an asteroid. *Deep Impact* was the more realistic of the two films. Most of us watching the films were probably quite comfortable with the notion that it is extremely unlikely anything like that will happen in our lifetimes.

Or at least I was until learning two startling facts:

1. Some recently declassified information from military satellites that have monitored the Earth for possible ICBM missile strikes have detected some spooky data. It turns out that over the past 10 years there have been 250 impacts in the upper atmosphere from "small" pieces of comets and meteors. Small, in the sense that each of the 250 impacts measured one kiloton or more in energy — that's the amount of energy yielded by a small tactical nuke.

2. Astronomers have only been able to identify 10 percent of the comets and asteroids likely to intersect with Earth's orbit. The good news is that it is unlikely any of the ones identified are likely to hit us within the next 100 years or so. The bad news is they have no idea of the size of the remaining 90 percent, or whether they could intersect with Earth's orbit tomorrow, next week, in ten years, or never. Considering the average of 25 impacts a year (one kiloton or larger), the lack of knowledge about 90 percent of the possible planet killers should give everyone a moment or two of serious, or anxious, thought. □

# Really Big Projects



**B**ig: great in size, extent, or capacity; large; great in force or intensity.

— Webster's New World Dictionary, Second College Edition

**W**e love Big. Big is better. It is human nature. We ponder the *Big* Bang. We visit the *Big* Apple. We fear *Big* Brother. The stars above us form the *Big* Dipper. The best of us are *Big* Hearted. We watch the *Big* Game. Show us the *Big* Picture. And then there is *Big* Science. *Big* Science has produced nuclear weapons, shattered atoms into quarks, and enabled man to walk across the surface of the moon. But we ain't seen nothin' yet. *Big* science inevitably results in *Big* Projects.

I have in mind a pair of *Really Big* Projects.

You want Big — I will give you Big.

## The Really Big Hole

Of all the places in the solar system, quite possibly the entire galaxy, there are two locations that our science fiction-driven imaginations seem incapable of leaving in peace — namely Mars and Venus. Here are two perfectly good planets, the first a cold, thin atmosphered, desert of a world, and the second, a place with an atmosphere thick enough to cut with a knife, and nearly hot enough to melt that knife. We just can't seem to keep our sticky little fingers off those pristine otherworld locations. No sooner do we land a space probe on them than we begin to specu-

late how we can improve these worlds, alter them, terraform them into something that mankind would find useful. Well, I think that before we go about remaking other planets in our own planetary image, we should first learn to appreciate, possibly even embrace, the alien nature of those worlds.

But how to do that?

They're so far away, so hard to get to. Wouldn't it be wonderful if there were some way to get a bit of Venus and Mars right here on good old Mother Earth? Imagine if you could pack the spouse and kids in the car, head down the Interstate, and then take the turnoff to either Mars or Venus. Well, there is a way. I've got a plan.

I call it the *Really Big Hole*.

Before I get into the details of the *Really Big Hole*, it will first be instructive to take a look at Venus and understand just what is going on with that planet. Yes, we all know that it is hot there, damned hot. I think that we all also have the notion that Venus is what happens if you let your planetary atmosphere slip into a runaway greenhouse situation. By Earth standards, the surface of Venus is far from what would be considered resort property. The surface temperature sits at a toasty 464 degrees Celsius, and the surface atmospheric pressure is equivalent to 90 Earth atmospheres, where 97% of that atmosphere consists of CO<sub>2</sub> (boo! hiss! — it is that evil greenhouse gas).

As good a greenhouse gas as CO<sub>2</sub> may be, it should be noted that even though the Venusian

atmosphere is made up almost entirely of CO<sub>2</sub>, *that* gas is responsible for trapping only 55% of the heat in the atmosphere. Water vapor, which makes up only 0.1% of the atmosphere, traps an additional 25%, while sulfur dioxide, at a mere 0.02% of the atmosphere, traps 5%. The remaining 15% is trapped by clouds and haze. The thing of importance here is that water vapor is one mighty good greenhouse gas — and we have a bountiful amount of it on Earth.

Now, as ugly as the surface of Venus may seem, you will find that as you move up into the atmosphere, both the atmospheric pressure and temperature drop. The same thing happens on Earth, of course. Go to the top of Mount Everest, and if you don't turn blue because you've got icicles hanging from your nose, you'll be turning blue from lack of oxygen. When you move 50 km above the surface of Venus, you discover that the local atmospheric pressure has dropped to 1 equivalent Earth atmosphere, and the local temperature is about 75 degrees Celsius. Still mighty hot, but it won't flash fry your skin. Heck, you can have liquid water under those conditions.

So what?

Well, here is what. If you want to build a bit of Venus right here on Mother Earth, all you've got to do is dig a hole — a *Really Big Hole*. Dig a hole some 50 km deep, and what will happen? Air is just like water — it flows downhill, wants to fill up the lowest possible levels. If you dig a hole 50 km deep on the surface of the Earth, the air pressure at the bottom of that hole will, to a pretty good approximation, be 90 times what it is at the opening of the hole — just like it is on Venus. You'll find that as you drop down into the Really Big

Copyright © 1998 by Robert A. Metzger

Hole, and all that air from our atmosphere flows in to fill it, at the 5 km mark you will be experiencing an atmospheric pressure twice that on the surface of the Earth. At 14 km down you will see a pressure of 5 atmospheres, and at 30 km the pressure will be 20 atmospheres. When you finally reach the bottom of our 50 km hole, the pressure reaches 90 atmospheres. And if you were at the bottom of that hole, between you and the Sun would be all that heat-absorbing CO<sub>2</sub>, water vapor, sulfur dioxide, methane and haze — all those things that threaten to heat up Earth's current atmosphere, but in quantities that would be up to 90 times greater than are experienced on the surface. The bottom line is that in the bottom of the Really Big Hole, it would get hot — Venus hot.

Okay, you might be thinking. You could believe all that, but you don't believe that you could dig a hole *that* deep. Sure you could. Why not? I can imagine you thinking, almost hear the wheels turning. You can't go down that deep, you'd hit all sorts of magma and molten rocks; the hole would just fill up with lava.

No.

If you dig at the edge of a tectonic plate, then you've got bad lava problems. But if you dig in the middle of a continental tectonic plate, then there's no real problem. The plates that make up the Earth's crust run some 10 to 70 km deep — with the thickest spots on the continents. This stuff is pretty solid. At the bottom of this crust, temperatures typically run 500 to 600 degrees Celsius. This is hot, but is not going to melt rock. The coolest magmas are at 800 degrees Celsius, while the hot ones go up to 1200 degrees Celsius — so we shouldn't run into molten mater-

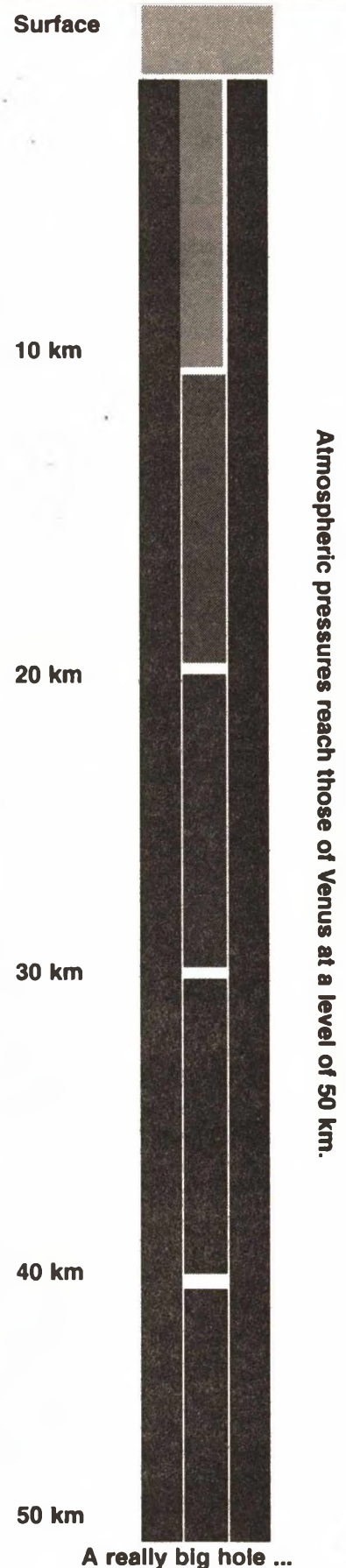
ial in the bottom of the Hole. As long as you don't run into magma vents coming up from the really hot parts of the Earth's deep interior, you've got no problem. All you need do is dig the hole.

How big? Well, we want to make it 50 km deep. Now you don't want to go down with perfectly straight walls — this would make the hole really prone to slides filling it back up. Think about how mountains look — with sloped sides. We want our hole to look like an inverted mountain, with pointy side down and a large opening — sort of like a hole that you'd dig in dry sand at the beach. If we take a gentle sidewall slope of 30 degrees (where 0 degrees would represent horizontal, and 90 degrees vertical), this would mean that the diameter of our 50 km deep hole would be 173 km (a little basic trigonometry there). The volume of this conical chunk of earth would be:

$$V = \frac{\pi r^2 h}{3}$$

where *r* is the radius of the opening of the hole, *h* is the depth and  $\pi$  is just pi (3.14159...). For the hole that we're talking about, it turns out that the volume is 392,000 cubic kilometers.

No doubt about it, that is a lot of crust. Assume that you have in your employ 10,000 of those hyper-monster dump trucks used in open-pit mining, which can hold some 10m x 10m x 10 m of crust, giving a total of 1000 m<sup>3</sup> for each load hauled away. With mass production, you can probably build those trucks for \$100,000 each, which would put the capital investment of this project at \$1 billion. No big deal. This is the cost of half a B-2 bomber. For 24-hour-a-day operation, running three shifts, you need 30,000 truck drivers, for an annual cost of \$1.5 billion (paying at a rate of \$50,000/year).



With a real production line, and digging from many locations at once, assume that each of those trucks can get its load, trundle it out, take it to the dump site, and then return for the next load in one hour's time. This means that each day, a single truck can take out some  $2.4 \times 10^4 \text{ m}^3$  of crust. With our 10,000 trucks, this would mean some  $2.4 \times 10^8$  cubic meters of crust a day. So how long does it take to remove  $3.92 \times 10^{14}$  cubic meters of crust?  $1.63 \times 10^6$  days — which translates into 4,465 years.

Not bad by terraforming standards, but perhaps a bit tough for the folks on planet Earth to maintain their enthusiasm over such a long time frame. We need something that can take place in a lifetime. That means we will need 100 times more trucks — some 1 million of them. With that number of trucks we'd be done in some 45 years — the capital investment would be some \$100 billion for the trucks, with an additional annual trucker payroll of \$150 billion. I'm sure Congress would allocate the funding of this — it is only one-fifth or so of the current federal budget. I know that the Teamsters would certainly back this plan — think of all the truckers employed in this project.

And after 45 years, what do you have? You've got a Really Big Hole, and a little slice of Venus sitting right at the bottom of it. And of course, you've got a whole range of environments as you walk up and down the side of your hole. Now, some of you might be saying that it won't be exactly like Venus — the atmosphere will still be an  $\text{N}_2/\text{O}_2$  mix. Sorry, that's the best I can do with the \$6-7 trillion spent over the duration of this 45-year project.

But there is a bonus. Remember all that planetary

crust that came out of the hole? Well, it has to go somewhere. The thing to do is to just pile it up next to the hole. If you use the same 30 degree sidewall slope as the hole itself, you'll have a mountain 50 km high — five times higher than Mount Everest. Halfway up that mountain, the atmospheric pressure will be 1/100 of that at Earth sea level, and the temperature will be -50 degrees Celsius. Do that temperature and pressure ring a bell with you? Well, they should. Those are the conditions on Mars. True, the Martian atmosphere, like that of Venus, is dominated by  $\text{CO}_2$ , so it's not exactly like Mars. But it's pretty darn close. And when you get to the top of the mountain, the pressure has been reduced to 1/1000<sup>th</sup> of an atmosphere. Starting to get mighty thin. All the ultraviolet and infrared wavelengths that our atmosphere blocks out are now streaming down on top of that mountain. Pretty barren up there, almost *moonlike*, you might be thinking.

So there you go. The Really Big Hole just about gets you 3 for the price of 1 — Venaforming, Marsaforming, and Lunaforming. Pack the family into the environmentally self-contained Planetary Ford Explorer, remember to include a full set of High Temp / Low Temp/High Pressure/Low Pressure suits, and you're ready to go on a multi-planet vacation without ever having to leave Earth.

The Really Big Hole is just my *Junior Really Big Project*, some-

thing to whet your appetite. What comes next is the Grand-Daddy of Really Big Projects.

**The Really Big Space Ship**  
Interstellar space travel. Science fiction writers have come up with all manner of interstellar travel, ranging from multigenerational arks to worm-hole-generating warp drives that can spit you across the galaxy in the blink of an eye. As wondrous and amazing as all these approaches may be, most suffer from a very fundamental problem.

Traveling for long distances, over long periods of time, can be a colossal pain in the butt. You can never pack all your stuff. You always forget something. Did you lock the door? Did you turn off the iron? You forgot to say good-bye to Aunt Mildred, who will be dead in some 12,000 years when you return due to relativistic effects. And then there is that library book you forgot to return.

What to do?

The answer should be obvious. Just take it *all* with you.

I've got a solution, one that I consider very practical. My method does not require any *magic* physics — the ability to go faster than the speed of light, or

## Bundle Your Back Issues And Save

Set #3



Get Issues 10, 11, 16 & 18 for only \$18.00

Order From:  
Aboriginal SF  
Set #3  
P.O. Box 2449  
Woburn, MA 01888

jump about the galaxy by way of Star Gates. No. I am going to use good old fashioned basic rocket science. Metzger's Rocket Science Law #1 says that momentum must be conserved (some of you with a historical fetish and knowledge of obscure ancient scientists might recognize this as Newton's Third Law of Motion — for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction). If you throw something out the back of your rocket ship with mass  $m_1$  at a velocity  $v_1$ , then the momentum of this exhaust is just the product of these two components —  $m_1 v_1$ . As a result, your rocket ship will be propelled in the opposite direction of the exhaust, and with the exact same momentum. This means that if your rocket ship weighs  $m_2$ , then the velocity of your rocket will be  $v_2 = m_1 v_1 / m_2$ . It's as simple as that. If the mass of what you threw out is the same as your rocket's, then you will move at the same speed as the rocket fuel (but in the opposite direction). The heavier the rocket, the slower you go.

You now know everything you need to know about rocket science.

Now back to my discussion about taking it *all* with you.

Forget all this business about building really big spaceships, or hollowing out asteroids and strapping on big fusion engines. No. The ideal solution is to simply move the entire planet. If you want to travel the four light years to Alpha Centauri, then just move the Earth those four light years. That way you don't have to pack your bags.

It *all* goes with you.

Now there is one *little* problem with this plan. We depend on the Sun to keep everything running on this planet. Without the Sun we'd all be popsicles by the time we moved Earth out

past the orbit of Mars. Well, the answer to that problem is obvious. We'll need to take the Sun with us.

What the heck, let's just move the entire solar system.

And here is the really beautiful part of this plan. You don't have to do a single thing to planet Earth. Unlike the case in which you try to move the Earth, you don't have to drain the oceans to get enough hydrogen to run the big fusion reactors needed to move the planet (which would probably occupy all of Australia and a sizable chunk of Europe). If you move the Sun, the Earth, along with all the other planets, just comes along for the ride by way of gravitational attraction.

So all we have to do is move the Sun.

First, we need some sort of engine, something to heat up our fuel so it is moving really fast when we blow it out the back of the engine (remember Metzger's First Law). Well, we are in luck. The sun is the perfect engine. In fact, that's all it is. It's one big fusion reactor. And the really amazing part is that it is almost all fuel. There is very little overhead. If and when we ever build a fusion reactor on Earth, the thing will probably weigh in at several thousand tons and be able to fuse a few micrograms of hydrogen. Not a very efficient use of mass. The sun is 78% hydrogen by weight, all of which can be used for fusion to generate energy.

What else does the sun have? It is in possession of some really intense magnetic fields. And that is a good thing, because we can take advantage of those fields. Here is where I wave my *future technology* wand. I will speculate that in the not too distant future (100 to 1000 years) we will be able to perturb the magnetic fields in the sun.

And why would we want to do that? The reason is that if you take a hydrogen atom (which consists of a proton and an electron) and ionize it (remove the electron from the proton), what you are left with is a positively charged proton and a negatively charged electron. Forget about the electron (it weighs some 1835 times less than the proton), and use the proton as the mass that you are going to shoot out of the Sun. It will be no problem. If you shape those magnetic fields right, the positively charged proton can be shot out of the Sun moving at nearly the speed of light. It's just like a particle accelerator.

*Proton propulsion.*

We'll need a lot of protons.

The sun weighs  $2 \times 10^{30}$  kilograms (a 2 followed by *thirty* zeros), while a single proton weighs in at  $0.167 \times 10^{-26}$  kilograms (that is 26 zeros *after* the decimal point). However, that is for a proton which is sitting still. If you get it going near the speed of light ( $3 \times 10^8$  meter/sec), then its mass increases (special relativity). For this little example, let's assume that we can use those magnetic fields to push the proton up to 99.9% of the speed of light. In that case, the proton's mass has increased by a factor of 22 and now weighs in at  $3.74 \times 10^{-26}$  kg.

Well, shooting one relativistic proton out of the sun is not going to move the sun very fast, by Metzger's First Law. In fact, its velocity is going to be  $5.61 \times 10^{-48}$  meter/sec. This is definitely not very fast. In fact, at this speed, if you wait 10 billion years, the sun would have moved some  $10^{-30}$  meters, or roughly one-billion-millionth of the width of an atom.

This is not exactly what I would call interstellar travel distances.

Obviously, what we need is more protons being shot out of our proton propulsion system. Let's make it easy on ourselves, and say that we would like to get the Sun moving at 20% of the speed of light — .20c (that's a good value — fast, but not so fast that the Sun's mass increases very much due to relativistic effects). So by Metzger's First Law, to get the Sun moving at .20c we would need to shoot out a mass moving at the speed of light that weighs .20 times the weight of the sun. That sounds bad. If we threw away 20% of the sun's mass, some bad things might happen on Earth. The gravitational tug on Earth would lessen, and our orbit would slip farther out. Also, the energy output of the sun would lessen (it's now got less fuel burning). Both these effects would really cool down the planet (perhaps that would be a good thing if we hadn't yet addressed global warming). But fortunately, since our protons are now so heavy (because they're moving at 99.9%*c*, and their mass has increased by a factor of 22), we need to throw out roughly only 1% of the Sun's mass as long as it is in the form of these heavy protons.

Not so bad.

So here is the plan.

We turn on our proton rocket engine and keep the exhaust pointed in the opposite direction from Alpha Centauri (you need to remember that the sun is rotating on its axis once every 25 days at the equator, so we need to keep shifting the location of our proton exhaust to take this into account). Let's accelerate at a very gentle 0.01 *g* — that is only one one-hundredth of the gravitational force that we feel on Earth (by contrast, astronauts may pull anywhere from 3 to 10 gees when launching from Earth). After one day of accelerating at that low rate, the Sun is

already moving at 18,000 miles per hour. What we need to do is keep accelerating until we cover two light years' distance (the half way point), and then turn the direction of our proton exhaust 180°, so that we can decelerate back to zero velocity over the next two light years (quite some braking distance). So the question is, how long does it take to cover those two light years, and what is your velocity when you reach that point? The equations are really easy.

$$D = .5AT^2$$

$$V = AT$$

where *D* is the distance covered (in this case two light years, which is  $1.86 \times 10^{16}$  meters), *V* is the velocity of the sun when you reach the two light-year mark, *A* is the acceleration (which for 1/100 of a *g* is 0.098 m/sec.<sup>2</sup>) and *T* is the time in seconds. Performing those calculations (I will leave that as an exercise for the reader), it turns out that the two light-year distance is covered in 19.5 years, at which point the velocity of the solar system will be just .2*c*. Isn't that handy, since I have already showed you that by Metzger's First Law we can get the solar system moving to .2*c* by throwing out 1% of the sun's mass, just as long as the proton exhaust is moving at 99.9% of *c*. During our 19.5 year outbound acceleration we are tossing protons out of the sun at a rate of  $6.6 \times 10^{20}$  kg/sec. That is a lot of protons (actually  $1.77 \times 10^{46}$  protons/sec). Once we reach the halfway point and turn the direction of the proton engine, it takes another 19.5 years to bring the sun to a stop right in the neighborhood of Alpha Centauri. Total trip time is 39 years, and you've used up 2% of the Sun's mass.

39 years is nothing — half of a human lifetime. And remember that you never even had to leave home. Once you get to Alpha Centauri you can explore,

take pictures, visit the locals, colonize, do whatever you'd like. You can refuel the sun by gobbling up whatever gas giants you might find there, or by siphoning off a bit of the local Sun's mass. And then you can be on your way to the next solar system that you'd like to explore.

Make it a three million year trip — the scale of time during which proto-humans evolved into us. If you arrive at a new solar system every 50 years, then the human race will have explored some 60,000 solar systems and traveled 240,000 light years during those scant three million years.

240,000 light years!

The diameter of our galaxy is *only* 100,000 light years. During those three million years you could travel from one end of the galaxy to the other and back again. And after all that exploring, perhaps the human race would be ready to make the big jump to neighboring galaxies. Andromeda is only 2.2 million light years away. So what if it takes us some 11 million years to get there? That is just a blink in geological time.

And what does it matter, because we will never have left home.

And think about this. Why stop at merely moving the Sun? The same approach could be used to move entire *galaxies*. We all know that the universe about us is expanding, all these distant galaxies hurtling away from us, all this motion an artifact of the Big Bang. *Perhaps not an artifact of the Big Bang.* Maybe the resident big brains of our universe have converted the galaxies into massive spacecraft, and they are just going on a little outing to visit the neighbors.

A spaceship of galactic proportions — that's what I call a *Really Big Project*. □

# Lou's Seventh Cylinder

By Marc Levinthal

Art by Lubov

The final reverberations died away; the cylinder stopped spinning, and the word "End" appeared on the blue glowing cathode screen. Lou lifted the cover of the tightbeam player and took the cylinder out. He stared into the rainbow facets on the shiny surface as he put it back into its cardboard tube.

"That's a jiv melo, com," Bernie said, voice constricted, holding hashish smoke. He exhaled and started to refill the Turkish hookah. "What was it? That guy you're crazed for, what? Mozart?"

"Yeah," Lou said, staring, "Late Period. Two Hundredth Symphony. Jesus, Bern, can you imagine? Two hundred! Kept writing into his eighties. He was still writing on his deathbed. Where does it come from, com?"

He turned his roundish, brooding face to look out the window. The pale, full moon was rising, wisps of incandescent clouds crossing the disc. He pushed beer up into the straw and swallowed some.

"I'm sure I don't know." Bernie got up to stretch. He was tall, six feet plus, like a hooptoss player, dark and hawklike, a product of the rich Uhuru Homeland/Cherokee Nation genepool, that source of novel vitality that the 1870s had given to the world.

"I just play the bass," Bernie said, "but you — you've got some of it. Whatever it is, wherever it comes from. Maybe a lot. So stop worrying about it." He looked at his watch. "Anyway, we must flare. It's five to eight."

"Shit! and I need to flip a fresh battery into the horseless; the charge is gone. Let's go."

Santini was waiting on the front walkway, arms folded across his burly chest, his dark face a mask of impatience, balding forehead wrinkling.

"It's the fifteenth, Lou," he said. "Rent's due on the first." A nervous cackle came out of Lou. Bernie stood aside, embarrassed.

"Heh — Tony — listen — as I've explained, this is not a problem. No problem! Tomorrow — well — no later than Monday, I will have a huge royalty check, which I will promptly cash —"

"You told me 'Monday' last Monday."

"I called to check on it. It's definitely in the post." The big Italian shook his head, scowled. "All right, this time. Look, this can't go on. I got bills to pay, too. Next time, you're out on your ass!"

Bernie and Lou hefted their guitar cases and hurried down the walk.

"Monday," Lou called back. "I promise!"

"The bastard," he hissed to Bernie. "He's bluff-

ing, of course."

After flipping in the spare battery, Lou moved the triangulated six-wheeler out into the Sunrise Avenue traffic. The Friday night Cruzados were already out in force; the lines of bright fluorescent-painted electrocarriages rolled slowly toward Vine Street.

"Shit! I should have taken Hitler Boulevard and cut over." Lou let out a sigh. "Too late now. What time is it?"

Bernie showed him his watch. Ten after eight.

The Vaao'k captain wriggled through the jelly-like medium that filled the slipship, pausing occasionally to extend a pseudopod to reach a pocket of the smoke that was his food.

Outside the transparent hull of the ship, spectral shapes, billowed, shifted within blasts of arrhythmic color-pulsing.

"Nearly there," pulsed the navigator, retracting his radio stalk as soon as he'd said it, causing a faint burst of static.

The captain didn't read this as anger; he knew that the navigator was quite preoccupied.

The Human ambassador sat encapsulated in an egg of regenerating atmosphere. The captain repressed a wave of nausea as he watched the ambassador ingest a solid material through his main head-orifice. The spongy white object was called a "sandwich."

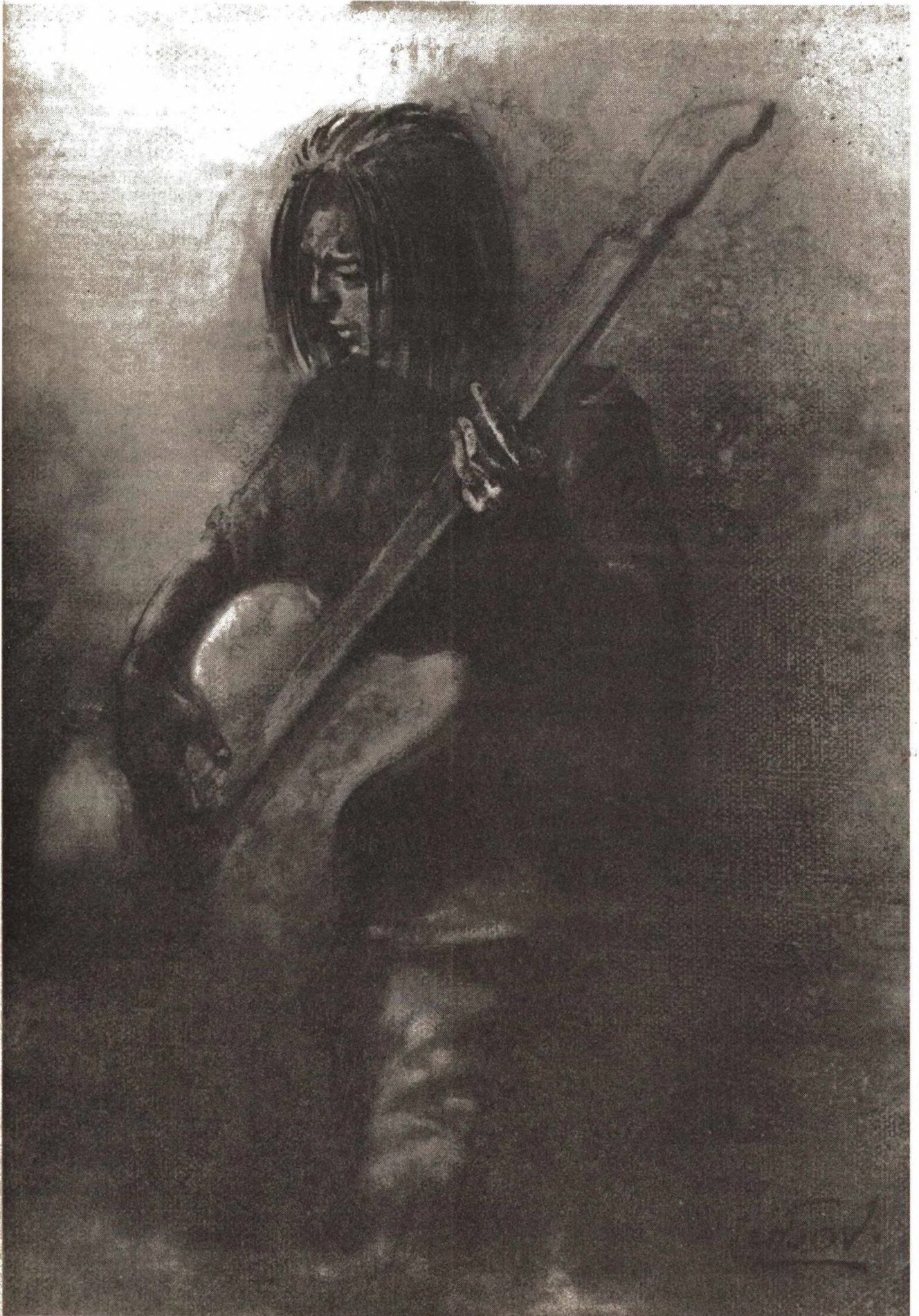
Fighting back his distaste, the captain pulsed, "Are you well? Comfortable? We have almost arrived."

The ambassador moved the same orifice that he used for ingestion, causing molecules of the surrounding atmosphere to compress and rarefy. This odd disturbance was interpreted by the ship intelligence and converted to understandable radio pulses.

"Very well, Captain," came the reply. "Your people have provided me with wonderful food. Remarkable, considering that you have no direct knowledge of it." The computer noted an expression of humor. "That's good news — I'm anxious to start the observations. As you know, one of the central catalysts of this anomaly is a hero of mine. A great composer of music."

"Yes," the captain pulsed, "this display of abstract relationships through the manipulation of





the surrounding gaseous envelope. How I wish I could directly experience this — I'm afraid that the voltage-fluctuation analog does not, unfortunately, translate properly. I know that your race is deeply affected by it, hence the importance of this individual."

"It moves us in much the same way as the mathematical flow-poetry does the Vaaok."

"He must be a great one," said the captain. "It must distress you to contemplate what may happen."

The ambassador dabbed at his ingestion-speech orifice with a piece of soft material. "Well, I can't claim to fathom the mechanics of the Probability Slipstream — even the most gifted human physicists find it hard to comprehend. But I was led to understand that the worlds and the peoples created in a Continuum Whiplash Effect were not ... well, real, precisely ..."

"No ... Not precisely real ..." The captain rippled spasmodically, causing slow waves to ripple through the aspic.

"President Buonaparte said today that no new troops would be sent to the former Yugoslavia as the fighting continues in Europe ..."

They pulled into the parking space outside the recording salon, and Lou hit the "off" button. The turbine whined as it ran down. The wireless went silent. He pulled his codecard out of the dash and popped the baggage compartment open as Bernie went around to grab the guitars.

Sylvie and Jake, the two keyboard players, were standing in the open back door of the studio, smoking pipes of tobacco, laughing about some obscure private joke.

"Glad you could make it," Sylvie chided — mock indignation.

"It's jiv, com. They're just starting to get sounds on the Turkish kit."

She smiled prettily, nodding toward the thudding repeat of a tom-tom sounding within. Shook her red-brown hair out of her face. Lou smiled back, for a moment taking in a picture of her. So attractive, he thought, in a witchy sort of way ... tall, lithe ... well, best to think of other things, since the attraction doesn't seem to be mutual — the music, for instance ... we should be able to do this in two or three tries; everyone knows the material pretty well. If we fuck up, we'll just pick it up from there, and I'll edit it on the strand recorder ...

He and Bernie entered the studio and faced the area where the thudding was coming from. They raised their fists in rhythm with the pounding, parodying the salute traditionally given by Blockheads to their favorite Screech bands.

"Fuck yourself!" yelled Tommy, the drummer, smiling, already shirtless, sweat pouring down from

his long, blond hair.

"Woo! You roll it, com! In the spiral!"

"Do you think we have time to roll out for some more beers?" Bernie asked no one in particular, as he leaned his guitar case against the wall.

A voice boomed out of the studio loudspeakers. "About twenty minutes more with the drums should do it." Michael Peters, the engineer. "You have my blessings, O Nubian Prince." They could see him through the glass partition, making the sign of the cross in the air.

"Go ahead," said Lou, "I'll set up your gear. Sir Michael sounds as if he dearly needs one. Twenty minutes — plenty of time." Let's hope it's not more like ninety minutes before the drums sound right, he thought. Time slips by like nothing ...

Three, two, one, and ... phase resumption, and the unnerving sensations that accompanied it. The ambassador pondered it for a moment. It felt as if his body were about to implode, but had thought better of it at the last nanosecond.

He peered out from his life-support bubble at the vague, blurred shapes of the Vaaok. Even after years of diplomatic work for Solsystem, the remnants of the old prejudices still remained. It was sometimes difficult to think of these amorphous blobs as the intelligent, aesthetic, empathetic beings that they were.

He ran his fingers through his spiky gray hair and yawned. He glanced at the floppy screen in his lap, still baffled by his having been selected by the Vaaok over the few hundred qualified scientists who had practically drooled at the prospect of a slipship voyage. Well, I've come as an observer, he thought, I'd better try to understand what it is I'm observing.

The vacuum anomaly had whipsnapped into being synced to Galactic Standard Cycle 307 — or the Earthyear A.D. 1993. History had been buffeted and warped — certain elements remained constant, while other features, including historically significant individuals, twisted backward or forward like disturbed swirls of cream in a coffee cup. This left holes for other features to fill, or to knock into other resonances, forming new, strange harmonics and dissonances. The initial time fluctuation front, which was centered somewhere near the end of the eighteenth century, had slammed solidly up against the twenty-first in this ghost-universe.

The paradox and mystery involved baffled him. The anomaly sprang into being, and history seemingly wrote itself into the intervening unsettled lapses. Here the psyche seemed to be inextricably meshed with and integral to the substance of spacetime: people who had not *existed* moments before remembered a shared history that had not actually occurred. Furthermore, the Vaaok had never

observed this phenomenon as separate from intelligence: a sentient species had, without exception, been found in the "eye of the hurricane." The implications were astounding — scientific evidence of a transpersonal consciousness — overmind? The dreaming of God?

What did it mean to exist? To remember? The questions, perhaps unanswerable, that sentient races had been asking since there was such a thing as self-reflection. Maybe the folly was in even asking, but encounters like these brought them tantalizingly close to an answer.

The material gleaned from the findings of the remote probe indicated a level of technology and culture roughly parallel to the "real" one. The ambassador touched the screen to get biographical material on the individual in question — the "rewritten" historical perspective. Born 1958, not 1770. Parents refugees — father well-known "Musique Bleu" pianist (jazz?). Fled to America to escape the Anarchist Russian invasion of Europe. (Allied Liberation, led by another first-generation American, General Adolf Hitler, came in '52. German Imperial government restored. Chancellor Eisenhower?) Too much to take in. Just too much.

He touched again, this time time to hear some of the strange music — so alien, yet so familiar ...

"All right — again from the — shut up while somebody's talking! — from the pickup to the B-section. One, two, three, and —" Heavy fuzztone minor. Lou played a melody on oscillator guitar that seared deep into the heart — keyboard strings chorded figure underneath it. A few bars later the two clarinophones joined into the pounding, slow march with a complementary melody, joined seamlessly so that it was hard to tell where the guitar melody ended and the new one began. Then the trumpet, another magic color for the endless sound spiral. And another ...

The engineer, Michael — gaunt, unshaven — sat in the darkened control room, transfixed. He had never heard — there had never been music like this. It touched some still, remote part of him that stood beyond the mundane, money-grubbing day-to-day, a place that witnessed only timeless beauty and strangeness. He felt ridiculous; he was crying — embarrassed, exhilarated, glad that no one could see him.

The melodies thundered now, intertwined, and



bloomed. The amplified sound level had risen dangerously, almost painfully, then suddenly dropped to pianissimo — for the final, ethereal minor chord the piece had begun with ...

He pressed a button on the console, and the racks of tandem recording cylinders stopped moving. He heard Lou faintly through the studio microphones: "Fine. I'll edit that to the first half when we mix to the strand recorder."

Michael hit the speakout switch. "Yeah ... um — do you want to come in and listen?" he asked weakly.

"No," Lou said, "let's go on to number three. Why, did you hear something wrong in there?"

"Wrong? No, nothing wrong."

Lou pulled the foam earplugs out of his ears; he wouldn't need them for the mix-down session. He liked to record playing *loud*, to feel the sound pressure level, but after having to have surgery to correct problems with his hearing ... that had been a close call. The experience had made him value what he had. He'd hear it well enough now on playback.

I love this, he thought as he came through the double doors of the control room, the chemical smell of the recording cylinders, the lights and readouts from the processing gear and the Babbage boxes, all of it.

He'd loved it from the first time his poppa had let him into one of his Bleu sessions with Uncle Louis, his namesake (though Momma had insisted upon the proper German version of the name).

Sitting in a big chair in the corner, listening to Satchmo wail ... It had always seemed like the inside of a rocket from some space romance — like anything — like you could do magic inside it, like anything was possible ... Michael was lining up all the cylinders, each containing a recording of an individual instrument or component sound, to the head of the start beep. Once aligned, they would all be driven in tandem from the same motor. Each one could also be offset to play behind or ahead of the rest of the cylinders, a feature that facilitated all manner of tricks and special effects.

"Michael," Lou said, "can I put this on?" He held up a tightbeam cylinder box. "Wanna get used to the speakers."

Michael took the cylinder and popped it into the player on the wall. He hit a switch on the board — electric dance music boomed through into the air: last year's Gershwin record — "Syncopated City." Good choice, he thought. Everybody's heard this

about a zillion times by now.

Lou sat before the sound-mixing board, between and in front of the two tulip-shaped speakers, trying his damndest to concentrate on the sound, his eyes drifting to Sylvie's reflection in the glass. She was curled up on a couch behind him, reading a paperback.

Suddenly she looked up, caught him staring, smiled. Busted. His face started to heat up.

"What's the book?" he asked, completely embarrassed. Inanely: "Looks pretty interesting."

"Spec fiction," she said. "Philip Dick. Yeah, interesting. It's based on things that supposedly really happened to him. He says he had an epiphany — was directly contacted by God, or something god-like, and was shown that the universe we inhabit is phony.

"That part's pretty vague — like what we see is some kind of echo of what's really there — I don't know. But some things did happen to him that are pretty hard to dismiss."

"Like to read it." He stared. Sylvie was back into the book. What if I just told her how I felt? he wondered. That letter I wrote — I couldn't ever really give it to her. What if I just said all that to her? Yeah, and what if she laughed, thought I was just fooling around, or was repulsed, or angry ... you're no handsome, skinny, young croonsinger, Lou. Still, how will I ever know? Well, he thought, deal with it later, because right now you're on the clock and over budget, this indie label isn't going to come through with any more cash, and you've got to pay the rent with what's coming.

"Let's do this," he said to Michael. "I'm ready."

The Vaaok sense units poured forth from an aperture in the ship's side, huffing outward into the void like scattering dandelion spores, small dullish-gray inflated triangles, each burrowing underspace to its predetermined mapping path, or falling into the ghost-Earth's gravity well, safely concealed in electromagnetic camouflage.

Within minutes, an elaborate picture was building up within ship intelligence, one showing the dimensions and properties of the tiny bubble universe. Less than a thousand light-years across, its elapsed interior time was just under two standard cycles. The light from the occulted "disappeared" stars continued to travel; terrestrial observers would detect nothing unusual for a millennium. That was, if ...

The ambassador toyed with the holo suspended before him, calling up multihued specifics. This new information would give the Vaaok details concerning the stability of this place: until now (based on data collected on previous expeditions), the safety of the slipship could only be reasonably guaranteed for approximately forty-eight Earth-hours. After that ...

he imagined it would be painless at least. Just — gone.

One of the protoplasmic Vaaok was half-pressed against the life-support bubble. The rest of it gently undulated. Ship intelligence identified it as the captain.

"Hello, Ambassador," a mild A.I. voice said. "The prognosis is poor, I am afraid. We can reasonably predict, using the latest information, that the continuum will collapse back into vacuum at some time after five and before one hundred years. I am very sorry — it is quite unstable. I had hoped — you must feel great sorrow."

"I — don't quite know how to feel ..." the ambassador replied. "All of those lives. Winking into being, existing for a moment ... winking into nothing again — do you believe it? Aren't they real down there? Don't they love? Create beautiful things? Feel pain? What are they?"

"I ... I ..." came from the computer, incongruously. "I ..." Then a different voice, emotionless: "Unable to code for proper semantic transfer."

"Couldn't I see for myself? I mean — what would happen if I went down there? Talked to someone?"

There was silence for a moment.

"If great care is taken," the captain said, "direct contact can be made. In fact, Ambassador, you were chosen for this mission in the hope that you would volunteer to perform this service for us. It is not in our nature to ask such a thing. Yes. Clearly, the data collected by our probes is significant and informative. In the last millenium, we Vaaok have come far in our understanding of these 'whiplash universes' — yet the central mystery remains. We are as baffled as you are: what essentially constitutes reality? Your direct, subjective experiences could prove invaluable to us in this respect.

"This sort of thing has only been attempted four times before — it is rare that a suitable member of the sentient race being observed is both present on the slipship and willing to attempt a field observation."

The ambassador felt an adrenaline surge at the prospect of a visit to this otherworld. "Well — what would you have me observe?"

"It does not matter," the cool, smooth voice said, "the very act will be enough." Then, ambiguously, "It may well be a futile exercise. There is so much that we don't know. Your Zen poets and quantum physicists, among others, have spoken of the complexities of such a study — the observer becoming one with the system observed.

"Your musical composer — a conversation with him would interest you, would it not?" The shapeless form fluttered. "We will prepare sensory recorders and an atmospheric craft for your journey."

Two other Vaaok flanked the captain.

The ambassador took a deep breath as he

watched them flow away in a broad, sinusoidal curve toward a dim blur of machine lights.

**I**nto the night, one by one, the mixes slowly materialized.

They weren't all that difficult, all things considered. The hardest part was mixing the short transitional sound-collages that went in between the main tracks. It was four o'clock, and the last of these was nearly finished: a Babbage manipulation of the voice of early *hommebleu* Jamie Hendrix, from the Lomax archives recordings.

"Lookjustlikalookjustlikalookjustlika —" The track faded out; after a few seconds, Michael stopped the cylinders. He picked up the box for the strandspool and started writing on it with a marker.

"What are you calling this album, anyway?"

"Just 'Seventh Cylinder,'" Lou said, "I've never been particularly fond of naming things."

"Yeah." Michael wrote more. "Somebody told me you had a cat named 'Cat.'"

Lou turned around, reached over to respool the stereo strand recorder, and stopped short.

The other musicians had gone (Bernie had gotten a ride with one of the clarinophon players, Joel), except for Sylvie, who was sound asleep on the couch. She still held the open book limply in her hands. Now he remembered Jake coming in and trying to wake her — must've gotten tired of waiting. Lou hit the rewind button, then got up and gently started to shake her shoulder. Sylvie's eyes opened — nobody home for a second — then she smiled.

"What time is it?" she whispered hoarsely.

"A little after four. Yeah, you were shelved, com.

We're just about over here."

She sat up, stretched, came awake. She inhaled deeply, let it out. "How am I gonna get all of my shit home now?"

"You can leave it here tonight if you want to," Michael offered, "nobody in here until tomorrow night. It's jivvy."

"I'll help you get it," Lou blurted out. He hesitated. "Uh — Sylvie — could I come by tomorrow and borrow some books by that — Dick guy? I mean — give you a ride and uh —" He was flustered, red-faced.

"Yeah — hey — I've got a few bulbs of beer in the fridge; we could watch the television or something." She stifled a laugh. "You're so weird, Lou."

**A**s usual, a panhandler was standing outside in the shadow of the doorway. They all knew Lou as an easy mark.

"Mr. Beethoven? Ludwig van Beethoven?"

Van Beethoven? Even knows my given name, he thought. Strange.

"Yeah, I think I've got something for you, no challenge, com." He reached into his pocket and handed the older man a Stevenson dollar. The man scrutinized the coin as if he'd never seen one before. Lou and Sylvie continued to walk to the horseless. "Who's that guy? He's a new one, what?"

For the first time, Lou turned to look at the oddly dressed, gray-haired man standing over by the wall. The man now stared straight at him — as if awestruck, or enraptured — saddened? "I dunno," he said. "I dunno. A ghost, maybe."

They laughed together — sleep-deprived giggling — and got into the electrocarriage. □

## Classified Ads

(CLASSIFIED ADS may be placed in *Aboriginal Science Fiction* for \$30 per column inch, or \$1.00 per word, per appearance, payment with order. A one-inch ad paid in advance for four issues is \$100. A one-inch ad paid in advance for 8 issues is \$190. Our recent survey shows that, based on a paid circulation of 12,000, each issue will reach an estimated 30,300 readers.)

**ORPHIA — SLAVIC SF**, award-winning, 222 pages, full-color art, full-slick digest. All stories and material in English. High quality production. \$9.95 per copy from *Aboriginal SF*, Dept. *Orphia*, P.O. Box 2449, Woburn, MA 01888 I-60

**PART-TIME** help needed, \$6/hour. Work includes typesetting, data entry, filing, etc. Must live within commuting distance. Send resume to: *Aboriginal SF*, P.O. Box 2449, Woburn, MA 01888. I-60

**WRITERS WANTED** for Science Fiction Magazine. For guidelines send Lou's Seventh Cylinder

SASE to Millennium Publications, 3507 Tully Road, Suite E-2-130, Modesto, CA 95356. Or visit <http://gnp1.com/magazine> I-54

**COLLECTIBLE SCIENCE FICTION/FANTASY/HORROR**. New, old, rare, and common fine quality first editions, small press and British titles, many signed. New and out-of-print. Inquire for free catalog. Realms of Fantasy Books, 1015 North Porter Avenue, Norman, OK 73071, (405) 329-6567 I-48

**MIND'S EYE FICTION —**  
<http://tale.com/>

SF stories by Larry Niven, David Brin, Spider Robinson, Tom Easton, Bud Sparhawk, Fred Saberhagen, etc. First part free — pay for ending on-line. I-58

**MICHAEL WHELAN ART PRINTS**  
We are proud to offer a large selection of posters, notecards, limited edition prints and art books by the premier SF/fantasy artist of today. Michael has won the Hugo Award 10 times and he has done cover art for most of the top

authors (i.e. Asimov, Clarke, Heinlein, McCaffrey, and King). For a full-color catalog, please send \$2 to: GLASS ONION GRAPHICS, P.O. Box 88, Brookfield, CT 06804. (203) 798-6063

I-54  
**EROTIC VAMPIRE** fiction, poetry, and art: **PRISONER OF THE NIGHT #7** includes James S. Dorr, Kevin Kirk, M.C. Sumner, Della Van Hise, others. \$9.95 pp US. P.O. Box 688, Yucca Valley, CA 92286-0688 I-48

**WORD PROCESSOR** will type your manuscripts/letters/screenplay. IBM/WP5.1+Max. Rough type/hndwrtn. Spell/punc/gram chks. Confidential. Prompt. Reliable. Affordable. Phone 818-312-9711. I-50

**H. BEAM PIPER'S MURDER IN THE GUNROOM**  
His rare first novel now back in print with an extensive biography and bibliography. \$20 plus \$4.00 shipping. OLD EARTH BOOKS, Box 19951, Baltimore, MD 21211. I-54

# Venus Macabre

By Eric Brown

Art by Jael

Devereaux chose Venus as the venue for his last performance for two main reasons: the stars cannot be seen from the surface of the planet, and Venus is where he first died.

His performance parties are the event of the social calendar on whichever world he visits. The rich and famous are gathered tonight on the cantilevered patio of Manse Venusia, deep within the Jungle of the southern continent: film stars and their young escorts, ambassadors and ministers of state, artists and big-name critics. They are all here, come to witness Jean-Philippe Devereaux perform what *Le Figaro* once described, before the Imams invoked the *sharia* on Earth and censored the reporting of such decadence, as “an event of diabolical majesty!”

Devereaux wears a white silk suit, Italian cut, long-lapelled.

He moves from group to group with ease and grace. He converses knowledgeably with politicians and film stars, scientists and karque-hunters alike. His reputation as a polymath precedes him; intellectuals queue to fox him, in vain, with the latest conundrums of the age. He seems to have an intimate understanding of every vocation, philosophy, and theory under the three hundred-and-counting suns of the Expansion.

Many guests, hoping that they might fathom the mystery of the man, find after a few minutes' conversation that he is an enigma too deep to plumb. A paradox, also. He talks about everything, *everything*, but his art. The implication is that his art speaks for itself. Guests speculate that his preshow ritual of socialization — a bestowing upon them of his brilliance — is a ploy to point up the disparity between the urbanity of the man and the barbarity of his act, thereby commenting on the dichotomy inherent in the human condition. At least, this is the theory of those who have never before witnessed his performances. The guests who have followed his act from planet to planet around the Expansion know not to make such naive assumptions: his art is more complicated than that, they say, or alternatively more simple. One guest alone, beneath the arching crystal dome, speculates that his creations are nothing more than a catharsis, a blowing-out of the intense psychological pressures within his tortured psyche.

“By the way,” Devereaux quips, almost as an afterthought, to each clique, “this will be my very

last public performance.”

He registers their surprise, their shock, and then the dawning realization that they will witness tonight that pinnacle of performance arts, the ultimate act.

Devereaux moves from the marbled patio, up three steps to the bar. As he pours himself a cognac, he disengages from his Augmentation — that part of him he calls the Spider, which he employs in conversation with his guests — and descends to the biological. The descent is a merciful relief. He leaves behind the constant white noise of guilt that fills the Spider with despair. As he settles himself into his biological sensorium, he can tolerate the remorse: it simmers in his subconscious, emerging only occasionally in berserker fits of rage and self-loathing. He downs the cognac in one.

Devereaux turns to the guests gathered below and experiences a wave of hatred and disgust. He despises their ignorance. More, he despises their lack of understanding, their easy acceptance that what he lays before them is the epitome of fine art. He tells himself that he should not submit to such anger. Their very presence, at one thousand units a head, more than subsidizes the cost of his therapy.

Across the crowded patio he catches sight of a familiar figure, and wonders if *he* is the exception. He did not invite Daniel Carrington; he came as the friend of a guest. Carrington stands in conversation with a Terraform scientist. He is tall and dark-haired. The perfection of his face is marred by a deep scar which runs down his forehead, between his eyes, over the bridge of his nose, and across his left cheek. He was attacked six months ago by an irate subscriber to Venus-Satellite Vid-Vision, on which he hosts the most watched, though at the same time most hated, prime-time show. Carrington films suicides in the act of taking their lives. He employs an empath to locate potential subjects, and a swoop-team of camera-people and engineers. He films the death and follows it up with an in-depth psychological profile of the individual's life and their reasons for ending it. Wherever he is in the Expansion, Devereaux makes a point of watching the show. There is no doubting Carrington's sincerity, his humanitarianism, and yet although the programme is watched by *everyone*, he is uni-



versally reviled: it is as if his viewers, needing to transfer their guilt at their voyeurism, find in Daniel Carrington an obvious scapegoat.... When he was attacked last year, he chose not to have the evidence of his mutilation repaired. He wears his wounds as the ultimate exhibition of defiant iconography.

Devereaux thinks that Carrington might be the only person in all the Expansion capable of understanding him.

He lays his glass aside and claps his hands.

"Ladies and gentlemen, if you please. I beg your indulgence."

Faces stare up at him.

He begins by telling them the story of the benign dictator of Delta Pavonis III, who loved his people and whose people loved him; a man of wisdom, wit, and charm, who was assassinated long before resurrection techniques became the plaything of the ultra-rich.

"Tonight you will witness the tragedy of his demise."

He leads them from the dome and out onto the deck of the split-level garden, into the balmy subtropical night. On the lower deck is a stage, and before it the holographic projection of a crowd.

The guests look down on a scene long gone, something quaint and maybe even poignant in the odd architecture of the stage, the costumes and coiffures of the colonists.

Devereaux descends to the lower deck, walks among the spectral crowd. They respond, cheer him. Something has happened to his appearance. He no longer resembles Jean-Philippe Devereaux. Projectors have transformed him into the double of the dictator. He mounts the stage and begins a speech — addressing not the crowd with a litany of policies and promises, but speaking to his guests. He recounts the life of the dictator, his theories and ideals.

The social elite of Venus watch, entranced.

Devereaux gestures.

Seconds before he is flayed alive in the laser crossfire, he sees Daniel Carrington staring down at him in appalled fascination. Then all is light as a dozen laser bolts find their target.

Purely as visual effect, his demise is beautiful to behold. His body is struck by the first laser; it drills his chest, turning him sideways. The second strikes laterally into his ribcage, compensating the turn and giving his already dying body the twitching vitality of a marionette. Then a dozen other bolts slam into him, taking the meat from his bones in a spectacular ejection of flesh and blood. For a fraction of a second, though it seems longer to the spectators, his skull remains suspended in mid-air — grotesquely connected to his spinal cord — before it falls and rolls away.

Then darkness, silence.

After an initial pause, a period during which

they are too shocked and stricken to move, the guests return inside. They are quiet, speaking barely in whispers as they try to evaluate the merit of the performance as a work of art.

On the darkened deck below, the hired surgeons and their minions are conscientiously gathering together Devereaux's remains. Hovering vacuums inhale his atomized body fluids; robot drones collect the shards of bone and flaps of flesh. His skull has come to rest in one corner, grinning inanely.

From the circular orbit of the left eye socket, a silver ovoid the size of a swan's egg slowly emerges. A polished dome shows first, then pauses. Next, a long, jointed leg pulls itself free of the constriction, then another and another, until all eight are extricated. The Spider stands, straddling the ivory, grinning skull. Devereaux, with a three hundred and sixty degree view of the surrounding deck and the salvage work going on there, tests the Spider's spindly limbs one by one. When he has mastery of their movement, he hurries off towards the dome. The legs lift high and fast with an impression of mincing fastidiousness as he skitters through the bloody remains.

Locked within the digitized sensorium of the Spider, Devereaux is a prisoner of the guilt that suffuses the analogue of his mind. At least, when he inhabits his physical self, the guilt shunts itself off into the storage of his subconscious for long periods. The memory of his sins, his remorse and regret, have no refuge in the Spider: they are all up front, demanding attention. He cries out in silence for the refuge of his biological brain. He does not know how he will tolerate the next seven days, while the surgeons rebuild his body.

He scuttles up a ramp, through the garden and into the dome where the guests are gathered. A dozen of his spider-like toys scurry hither and yon, affording him the perfect cover.

He finds Carrington and climbs onto the back of an empty chair. He stands and watches, his body pulsing on the sprung suspension of his silver limbs.

"Perhaps," Carrington is saying, "rather than viewing his art from the standpoint of trying to work out what he *means*, what we should be asking ourselves is *why*? Why does he employ this macabre art form in the first place?"

There is silence around the table.

"Maybe," Carrington goes on, "the answer lies not so much in Devereaux's attempting to come to terms with the outside world, but with the monster that inhabits the darkness of his inner self."

Carrington turns his head and looks at the Spider, but his eyes do not dwell long enough for Devereaux to be sure if he knows for certain.

"I've heard it said that our host was once a starship pilot."

The Spider climbs down from the chair and



skitters across the marble floor towards the darkness of the manse.

For Devereaux, the seven days he is captive in the Spider are like as many years. Never has he known the time to pass so slowly. While he exists within the Spider he cannot sleep, nor shut down the process of intellection. The unbearable recollections from all those years ago howl without cessation in his awareness.

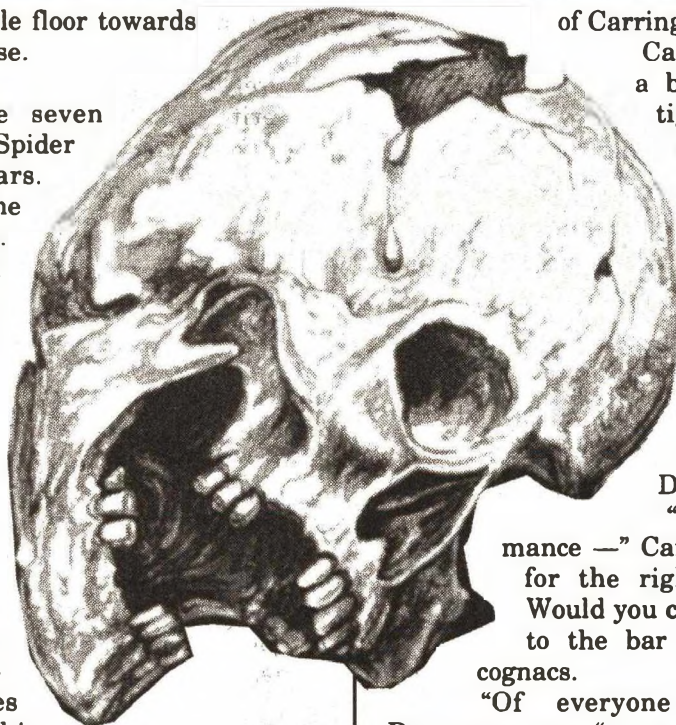
On the eighth day he is restored to his biological self. It is like coming home, returning to a familiar, comfortable domicile. He hurries to the lounge and checks his video and fax for calls. There is a communique from Daniel Carrington. Will Devereaux care to meet him in Port City, to discuss a business proposal?

That evening, Devereaux sits in a leather armchair overlooking the Jungle. He is aware of the degeneration of his body. He is exhausted. His bones ache. He is beset by irregular muscular spasms, hot and cold flushes, and bouts of nausea. This is to be expected. How many times has this body died and been put back together again? Fifteen, twenty? Devereaux gives thanks that soon it will all be over. He looks ahead to his rendezvous with Carrington, the confession he will make to someone he feels sure will understand his guilt.

Devereaux hires a chauffeured air-car to transport him the five hundred kilometres to Port City. The metropolis has changed since his first visit to Venus, twenty years ago. Then it was little more than the beachhead settlement of an infant colony, struggling for autonomy from Earth. Now it is a thriving community the size of Tokyo or Rio, grown rich from the mining of the planet's many natural resources.

The air-car descends and speeds through the twilight streets to the headquarters of VenuSat, the station with which Carrington has his show.

He takes an elevator to the penthouse suite. A servant shows him along a corridor and into a large, glass-enclosed room, more like a greenhouse than a lounge, filled with a riot of brilliant blooms and vines. A white grand piano occupies an area of carpeted floor before a view of the illuminated city. Black and white photographs stare at him from every wall. He recognizes them as the late subjects



of Carrington's shows.

Carrington himself, urbane in a black roll-neck jacket and tight leggings, emerges from behind a stand of cacti.

He smiles and takes Devereaux's hand.

"So pleased ..." he murmurs. The livid, diagonal scar that bisects his face is wax-like in the dim lighting.

"I conducted a little wager with myself that you would be in touch," Devereaux says.

"I found your final performance —" Carrington pauses, searching for the right word — fascinating. Would you care for a drink?" He moves to the bar and pours two generous cognacs.

"Of everyone present that night," Devereaux says, "your speculations came closest to the truth."

Carrington affects surprise — but it is just that, an affectation. "They did?"

"You saw through the charade of the so-called 'act' and realized that it was nothing more than a rather self-indulgent form of therapy."

Carrington makes a modest gesture, not owning to such insight.

"I presume," Devereaux goes on, "that you summoned me here to find out why — why for the past twenty years I have indulged in such psycho-therapy?"

He suspects that Carrington is wary of coming right out and saying that he wishes to record his very last act. Devereaux has the reputation of a temperamental recluse, an artist who might not view kindly the trivialization of his death on prime-time vid-vision.

But why else did Carrington summon him, other than to secure the rights to his ultimate performance?

Carrington surprises him by saying, casually: "But I know why you have resorted to these acts."

"You do?" Devereaux walks to the wall-window and stares out at the scintillating city. Surely, even so celebrated a journalist as Daniel Carrington could not successfully investigate events so far away, so long ago?

He turns, facing Carrington. "Perhaps you would care to explain?"

"By all means," Carrington says. "First, Jean-Philippe Devereaux is a nom-de-plume, the name you took when you began your performances —"

"Bravo!"

"Please, hear me out. Your real name is Jacques Minot, born in Orléans, 2060. You trained at the

Orly Institute in Paris, graduated with honours, and joined the Chantilly Line as a co-pilot on the bigship *Voltaire's Revenge*."

Devereaux — although Carrington is correct, he will be Devereaux to his dying day — hangs an exaggerated bow. "I applaud your investigative skills, M. Carrington." He is oddly disturbed by the extent of Carrington's knowledge. He wanted to confess to him, admittedly — but in his own time.

Carrington continues. "You served on the *Voltaire* for ten years, then twenty years ago you were promoted to pilot and given your own ship, the *Pride of Bellatrix*. The same year you made the push to Janus, Aldebaran, and on the dark side of that planet something happened."

"But you don't know what?" He feels relief that Carrington does not know everything, that he will after all be able to confess.

"No, I do not know what happened," Carrington says. "But I know that it was enough to make you quit your job and perfect your bizarre art."

"I must applaud you. I never thought I would live to hear my past delineated with such clinical objectivity." He pauses. "But tell me — if you know nothing about what happened on Janus, how can you be so sure of my guilt?"

Carrington smiles, almost to himself. "You were a little insane when you landed on Venus all those years ago — perhaps you still are. You found a street kid. You gave him your laser and a lot of creds and told him to burn a hole in your head. You told him that you deserved it. Not that he needed any justification — all he wanted was the cash. But he couldn't bring himself to laser your head. He put a hole in your heart instead, figuring it was all the same anyway — you'd be just as dead. Except it wasn't the same at all. When the medics found that you were carrying a pilot's Spider Augmentation and had the creds to pay for rehabilitation, they brought you back. After that ..." Carrington shrugs. "I think you developed a taste for dying as a way of assuaging your conscience. You turned it into an art form and it paid for your resurrections."

Devereaux says, "I take it you found the boy?"

Carrington makes a non-committal gesture, as if to say that he cannot divulge his sources.

Outside, lightning zigzags from the dense cloudrace, filling the room with an actinic stutter. Seconds later a cannonade of thunder trundles overhead.

"How did you find out?" Devereaux asks. "About my past, about what I intend to do —?"

"What do you intend, M. Devereaux?"

Carrington's attitude surprises him. What might he gain by feigning ignorance?

"Let me proposition you, M. Carrington. You can have the exclusive rights to my absolute suicide, if you will listen to my confession ..." Such a small price to pay.

"Your suicide?"

"Not just another performance — this will be the real thing, I have played with death long enough to know that nothing but true extinction can pay for what I did. Or did you think I planned an ultimate *physical* suicide, and that I intended to live on in my Augmentation, immortal? Now that would be a living hell!"

But Daniel Carrington is shocked. He stares at Devereaux, slowly shaking his head.

"No ..." he says. "No, I can't let you do that."

Devereaux is flustered. "But come, isn't that why you wanted to see me? To arrange to broadcast the ultimate event?"

From the inside of his roll-neck jacket, Carrington withdraws a pistol. It is a karquehunter's dart gun. He holds it in both hands and levels it at Devereaux.

"Do you think for a minute that I like what I do, M. Devereaux?"

"Why, my dear man —"

"Do you think I enjoy living with death? Christ, everyone on the planet despises, me. I have this—" he gestures to his scarred face — as a continual reminder."

Devereaux tries to be placatory. He is non-plussed.

"You didn't want to meet me to ask my permission —?" he begins.

"I asked you here to kill you," Carrington smiles.

Devereaux is sardonic. "With that?" he says. "My dear man, you'll need more than a dart gun to destroy my Spider." He pauses, peering at him. "But why?" he whispers.

"I've hated you for so long, Devereaux," Carrington smiles. "Of course, I naturally assumed you were dead — but I still felt hatred."

"You ... ?" Devereaux says. He recalls the kid he picked up, all those years ago.

"I didn't realize you'd survived, you see," Carrington says. "All I could think about was that you'd used me to kill yourself." He pauses. "Then I saw your picture on the vid, read about your forthcoming trip to Venus — and I knew I needed revenge. I had to kill you."

He fires without warning. The bolt hits Devereaux in the chest and kills him instantly — kills, that is, the body, the meat, the biological entity that is Jean-Philippe Devereaux. As the body falls to the floor, Devereaux finds himself in the sensorium of his Spider.

"Monsieur Carrington ..." His transistorized voice issues from his unmoving lips. "There is a laser in the inside pocket of my jacket. If you set it at maximum, it will dispatch my Augmentation,"

Carrington is standing over him, staring down. "But first —" Devereaux pleads. "First, please,

let me confess.”

“No!”

Carrington steps forward, slips a small laser from his jacket.

“That —” the Spider says “— is hardly powerful enough.”

“For the past five years I’ve dreamed of this moment.”

“Please, my confession!”

“I dreamed of putting you to death, Devereaux — but that would be too good for you.”

Devereaux screams a hideous: “No!”

Carrington lifts the laser and, with an expression of revulsion, fires and separates Devereaux’s head from his shoulders. He grasps a hank of hair and lifts the head. Dimly, through failing eyes, Devereaux makes out on Carrington’s features an expression of supreme satisfaction. “That would be far, far too good for you.”

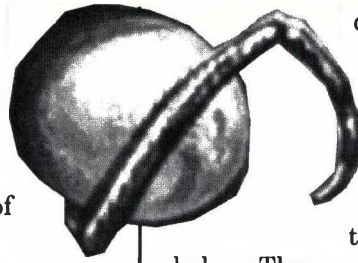
**T**ime passes ... Devereaux has known seven days as a prisoner in his Spider — in one case ten days — but always these periods were made tolerable by the knowledge that soon he would be returned to his body. Now there is no such knowledge. Upon killing him, Carrington bisected his head and fished out the Spider, bound his limbs, and imprisoned him within a black velvet pouch, so that he did not have even the compensation of vision with which to distract his attention from the inevitable ... He had only his memories, which returned him again and again to the dark side of Janus.

At spiraldown, his co-pilot had pulled from the net, left Devereaux — or Minot, as he was then — to oversee the simple docking procedure. Devereaux had disengaged from his Spider a fraction of a second too soon, forgetting that he was on the dark side of Janus, where icy, hurricane-force winds scoured the port. He had not been paying attention, looking forward to his leave instead. The Spider would have been able to save the ship, calculate the realignment coordinates pulsed from the control tower — but Devereaux had no hope of processing so much information in so short a time. The *Pride of Bellatrix* overshot the dock and exploded into the terminal building, incinerating a hundred port workers, as well as the ship’s three hundred passengers, beyond any chance of resurrection ...

Devereaux alone had survived.

His dreams are forever filled with the faces of the dead, their screams, and the unremitting stars of dark side illuminating a scene of carnage.

Devereaux calculates that one week has passed when Daniel Carrington unties the pouch and daylight floods in. He expects Carrington to have devised for him some eternal torture: he will entomb him in concrete and pitch him into the



deep Venusian sea, or bury him alive in the wilderness of the central desert.

Carrington lifts him from the velvet pouch.

Devereaux makes out the turgid Venusian overcast, and then the expanse of an ocean far below. They are on a chromium catwalk which follows the peak of a volcanic ridge. This is a northern tourist resort; silver domes dot the forbidding gray mountainside.

Carrington turns and walks along a promontory overlooking the sea. Devereaux knows, with terrible foresight, what Carrington has planned.

Carrington holds the Spider before his eyes. Devereaux tries to struggle, realizes then with mounting panic that his legs have been removed. Even his only means of psychological release, a scream, is denied him.

“I’ve had a long time to think about what I should do with you,” Carrington whispers. “At first I wanted to kill you.”

Devereaux cries a silent: No! He knows now that Carrington will pitch him into the sea, and that he will remain there forever, alone with his memories and his remorse. He tries to conceive of an eternity of such torture, but his mind balks at the enormity of the prospect.

“And then, when you told me that you intended to kill yourself anyway, I decided that there was another way of punishing you.”

No! Devereaux yells to himself.

Carrington is shaking his head.

“But to do that would be as great a crime as doing what I thought I had done to you twenty years ago.” He stares off into the distance, reliving the past. “Perhaps the only way I can cure myself, Devereaux, is by saving you — and the only way I can save you is by destroying you.”

Carrington turns then and strides along the catwalk. Seconds later he is standing on a railed gallery overlooking a fumarole brimming with a river of slow flowing lava. With little ceremony, Carrington hefts the remains of the Spider and pitches it from the gallery.

Devereaux gives thanks to Daniel Carrington as he tumbles through the air. The seconds seem to expand to fill aeons. He experiences a surge of relief, and for the very last time the pain of guilt.

Devereaux hits the lava, and the casing of the Spider melts in the molten stream, and then he feels nothing. □

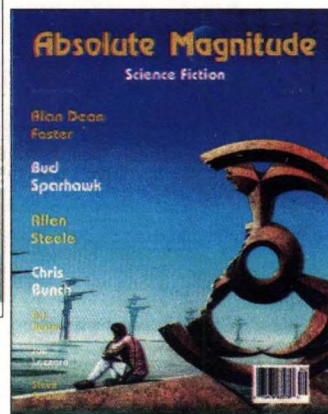
## Moving?

If you plan to move in the next several months, please send us your change of address or you may not get your next issue.

# Four Great Magazines



*Aboriginal Science Fiction*



*Absolute Magnitude*



*Dreams of Decadence*



*Weird Tales®*

# One Low Price

**Join us for a celebration of the 75th anniversary of *Weird Tales®*!**

DNA Publications is proud to be the new publisher of this classic fantasy and horror magazine. There's never been a more important genre magazine than *Weird Tales®* and there's never been a better time to subscribe. Come with us as we take this publishing legend into the next millennium along with our three other publications: *Aboriginal Science Fiction*, *Absolute Magnitude* and *Dreams of Decadence*.

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1 year <i>Aboriginal Science Fiction</i> \$16 | <input type="checkbox"/> 2 years <i>Aboriginal Science Fiction</i> \$28 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1 year <i>Absolute Magnitude</i> \$16         | <input type="checkbox"/> 2 years <i>Absolute Magnitude</i> \$28         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1 year <i>Dreams of Decadence</i> \$16        | <input type="checkbox"/> 2 years <i>Dreams of Decadence</i> \$28        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1 year <i>Weird Tales®</i> \$16               | <input type="checkbox"/> 2 years <i>Weird Tales®</i> \$28               |

**CIRCLE THE MAGAZINES YOU WANT**

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1 year <b>Any TWO Magazines</b> \$30   | <input type="checkbox"/> 2 years <b>Any TWO Magazines</b> \$54   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1 year <b>Any THREE Magazines</b> \$45 | <input type="checkbox"/> 2 years <b>Any THREE Magazines</b> \$81 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1 year <b>All FOUR Magazines</b> \$60  | <input type="checkbox"/> 2 years <b>All FOUR Magazines</b> \$105 |

My  check or money order is enclosed.

Please bill my:  Visa  MasterCard.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Card # \_\_\_\_\_ Exp. Date \_\_\_\_\_

NAME : \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_ STATE \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP \_\_\_\_\_

**Send all payments to: DNA Publications, P.O. Box 2988, Radford, VA 24143-2988**