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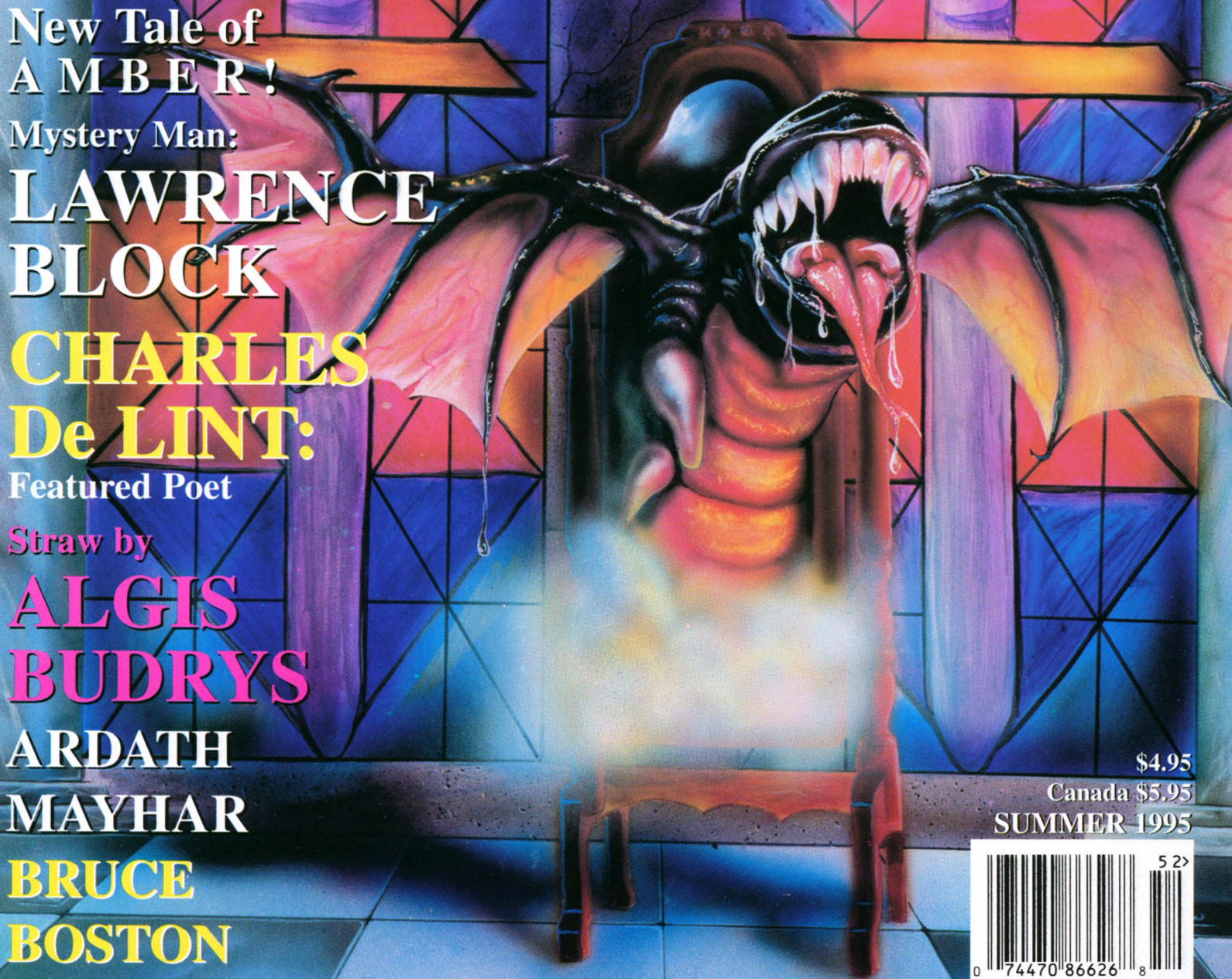
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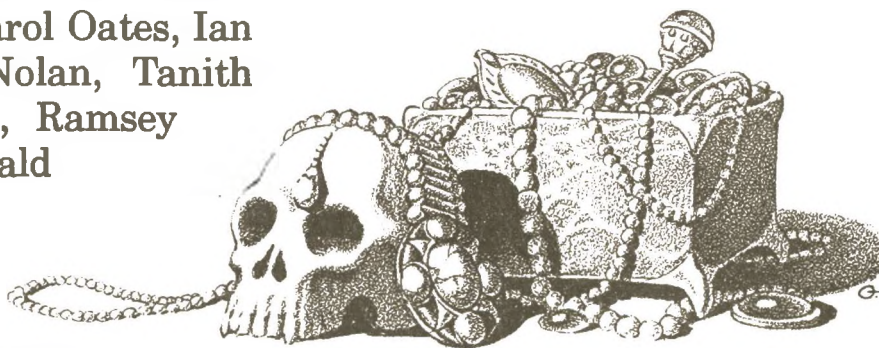
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From the Editor's Desk



Recently I was interviewed by a fifth grader at Daniel Street Elementary School. Having not been in an elementary school for some time, I, like many people, was amazed at how small everything was. I was even more amazed at the maturity level of these young people.

I don't remember being mature when I was ten. In fact, I remember exemplifying everything that maturity was not! The questions the young lady asked threw me--I've been interviewed plenty of times, for magazine pieces, books, etc. and I have never been at a loss for words--until now. How does one answer the question, "How have things changed since you were a kid?" Well...Uh...Um...well things were different. That's all I came up with--it was different. But the more I thought about it, the better the answer got. (Though it was clearly lacking the flowery language and insightful observations the young lady was expecting from a publisher) Things certainly were different. And though I tried hard, I was challenged to find positive changes--most of the ones I came up with were negative and that bothers me because it is my generation that has made many of the changes.

When I was a kid growing up on Long Island my family did not lock the front door to my house. A month ago, the house next door to my mother (and step-father who was a cop for over thirty years) was robbed. While I was FAR from a well behaved young man--I still had a certain respect for people and things around me that doesn't seem to be present today.

As I re-read the above paragraphs I cringe at how much I sound like the old people I swore I would never become--but the truth is the truth and things here in the good old US of A don't seem to be getting any better. Our politicians focus on talk radio hosts instead of homelessness and misrepresent the people of this country on a daily basis. The family infrastructure that made this country great appears to be deteriorating before my very eyes. The young people of today have their work cut out for them.

Now one might think I'm a conservative--but in fact, I'm a Democrat and I believe in all the rights that our constitution provides us--but I think we need to take a long hard look, as I have said on this page before, where we are going as a nation. When it comes to pass that another person can decide what I am not capable of viewing, reading, and listening to, I think I'll pack up a boat and float to Cuba.

Anyway, now that I'm done rambling--what do you think of the new and improved PW cover? I'm very proud of it and I'm sure it will help the magazine grow even more than it already has. So...read on and enjoy....

Yours In Haste

Edward J. McFadden
Pirate Writings Publishing

PIRATE WRITINGS

Tales of Fantasy, Mystery & Science Fiction

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COVER: This issue's cover was done by Michael Apice, a talented young artist whose work has appeared in many magazines and on many book covers. Look for more of Michael's work on the next cover of PW. **BELOW:** "Growing Hearts" was illustrated by David Grilla.



Letters

Dear Mr. McFadden:

In the time between my submitting "Old Dogs" to you and your courteous response, my father, Col. Norman DeBord (U.S. Army, Infantry, ret.) died and we buried him with full military honors at Arlington National Cemetery, in the snow. Yesterday morning I penned a note to Maj. Gen. Dohleman (U.S. Army, ret.)—a family friend who helped a great deal with the arrangements and our stay in D.C.—to the effect that although I had written "Old Dogs" for another old soldier, I had also come to associate it with my father. I had intended to read it at the local memorial service but a snowstorm here precluded.

An hour later I opened my P.O. Box to find your acceptance letter saying you would like to publish "Old Dogs."

Thank you.

Sincerely yours and looking forward...

Kyle Christopher
Eugene, OR

[I don't normally publish letters from contributors, but this letter touched me and I felt "Old Dogs" (on page 18) would be enjoyed by the readers of PW more if they knew its history. You have my condolences.]

Dear Mr. McFadden:

Congratulations on another great issue with Spring '95. PW's fiction consistently challenges the boundaries of science fiction and fantasy writing.

Thanks for hours of great reading—I look forward to many more.

Erin Friedeman
Palatine, IL

[Thanks for the kind words, Erin. I'm glad you're enjoying PW and I can promise even better fiction in the future.]

Dear Mr. McFadden:

I am so tired of reading the same old stories over-and-over again. It seems that so many of

today's bigger fiction magazines publish only big-name writers that turn out to be big bores.

So when I found Pirate Writings to be such a different and unique publication, I couldn't help but to subscribe.

And lo and behold my second issue of PW (Spring '95) was even better than my first. I loved "Returning" by Ian R. Macleod. This tale exemplifies what strong speculative fiction should be. I also enjoyed "Leakage" by Paul Di Filippo. I must admit I was surprised to see this tale in print. It is so different I can imagine how difficult it was for him to find a home for it. A great story.

Well—that's about it for now. Keep up the good work.

Kim Dayer
Miami, FL

[Kim, would you like to write the magazines ad copy?]

Dear Mr. McFadden:

I was pleased to find a copy of your magazine in the Barnes and Noble bookstore in Ventura, California, in the new larger format, and I immediately snapped up what turned out to be the last copy on the shelf. After reading it, I can only hope that future issues continue to appear regularly with the same content and quality as the Spring '95 issue.

Christopher Holliday
Irvine, CA

[I am happy you enjoyed PW, but it always bothers me to hear that the magazine has sold out so early and not been replenished. (I received this letter on March 14, 1995—one month after the Spring issue went on sale) I wish the reorder system with respect to magazines was better so everyone who wants to buy a copy of PW can find it.]

Your letters and comments are welcomed. Send to: Letters to the Editor, Pirate Writings, 53 Whitman Ave., Islip, N.Y. 11751

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Roger Zelazny is one of Science Fiction/Fantasy's true luminaries. He has written more books than this humble editor can count and garnered six Hugo awards and three Nebula awards. Some of his books include: Lord of Light, Eye of Cat, Flare, The Chronicles of Amber and A Night In The Lonesome October, just to name a few. We are lucky to have him within the pages of PW.

This story takes up the second Amber series where "The Shrouding and the Guisel" (which appeared in the first issue of Realms of Fantasy) left off. It shows the continuing tale of Merlin's strangling cord, Frakir, while telling more about the leftover guisel and the sorcerer responsible for the affair behind the mirror. Flora and the visiting Luke are drawn into the action.

I have been using an occasional short story of late to tie up loose ends I'd left hanging in previous Amber books and stories, as well as to continue the overall narrative. The first of these stories was "The Salesman's Tale," featuring Luke and Vialle, which appeared in the February 1994 (#6) issue of Amberzine, and the second was "Blue Horse, Dancing Mountains," which will appear this Summer in the AvoNova collection of gambling stories, Wheel of Fortune, edited by myself. "The Shrouding and the Guisel" was the third Amber short story, and "Coming to a Cord" is the fourth.

So, if anyone has a burning Amber question, I suggest they send it to me c/o AvoNova and I may be able to straighten the matter out in one of these stories (I may not, also). And to all you Amber fans, thanks for hanging around for so long.

- Roger Zelazny

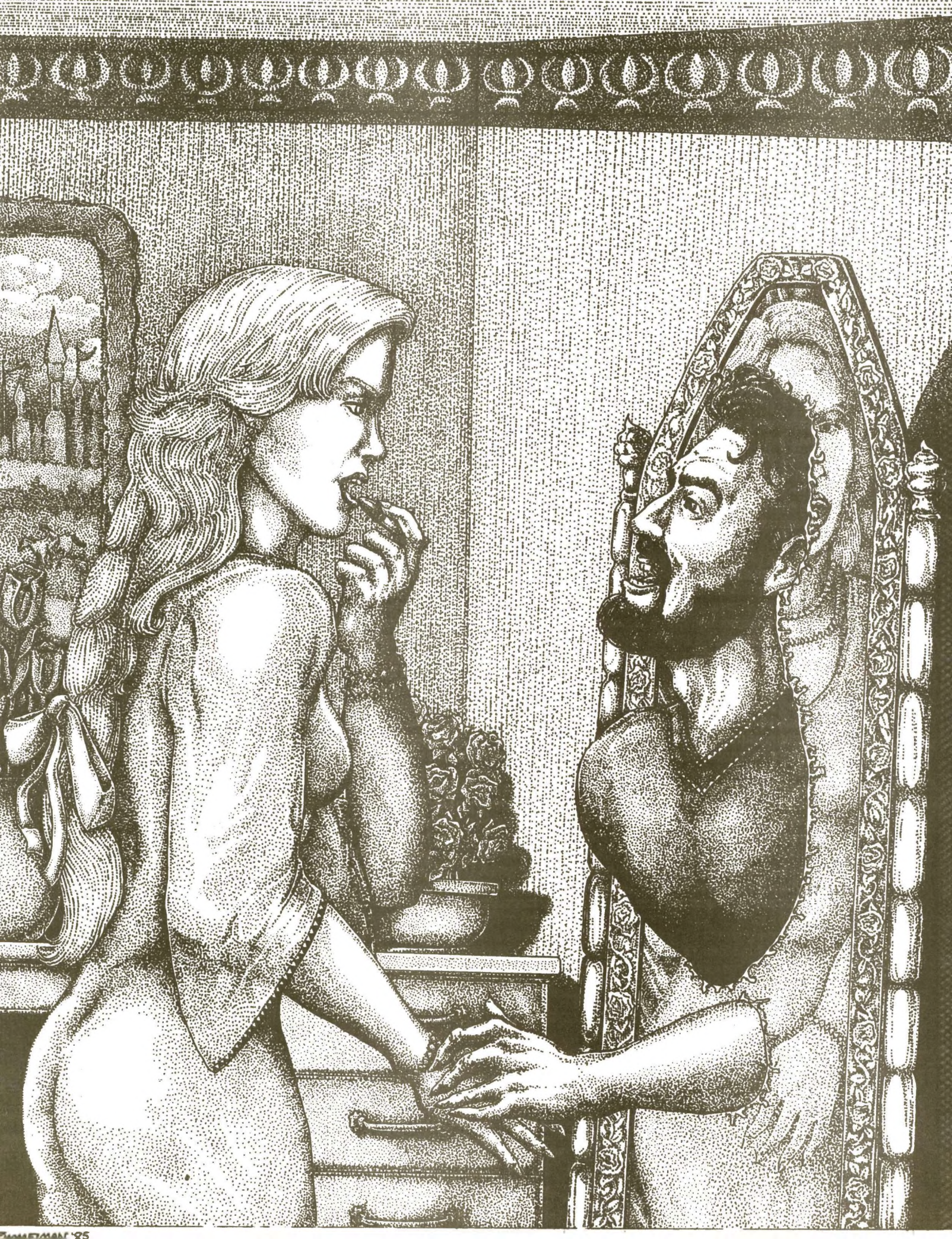
Coming To A Cord

BY ROGER ZELAZNY

Illustrated by James Zimmerman

Return to AMBER!

IT IS NO FUN BEING TIED TO A bedpost when you are feeling under the weather. I phased back and forth between visibility and invisibility uncontrollably. On the other wrist, I felt my ability to communicate beginning to return. My increased sentience had remained with me ever since my strange journey with Merlin in the place between shadows. But there was a shock on my return to this reality. Slowly now, I was recovering from it, though some of the symptoms were slower in going than others. Consequently, it took me much longer than it normally would have to unknot myself.





I am Frakir, strangling cord to Merlin--Lord of Amber and Prince of Chaos. Normally, too, he would never have abandoned me like this, in the blasted apartments of Brand, late Prince of Amber and would-be Lord of the Universe. But he was under a mild spell Brand had actually left about for his son Rinaldo. However, Merlin has such a strong affinity with Rinaldo--also known as Luke--by virtue of their long association, that the spell latched onto him. He must have shaken it by now, but that still left me in an awkward position, with him doubtless back in the Courts.

I did not feel like waiting around with all the rebuilding and redecorating going on. They could decide to chuck the bed, with me attached, and go for all new stuff.

I finished unknottng myself. At least Merlin had used no magic when he'd tied me there. On the other hand, it was a tight knot, and I squirmed for a long while to get myself unlooped. Finally, the thing was loosened and I was able to undo it. Once I had freed myself from its subtle geometries, I slithered down the bedpost to the ground. This left me in a position to slip away, should a gang of furniture movers suddenly appear. In fact, it suddenly seemed a good idea to get out of the fast traffic lane now.

I moved away from the bed--out of Brand's room and into Merlin's--wondering what had been the secret of that ring he'd found and put on--the spikard thing.

That it was extremely powerful and drew its energies from many sources was obvious to a being such as myself. That it seemed a thing of the same order as the sword Werewindle was also readily apparent, despite their varied forms to the eye of a human. Suddenly, it occurred to me that Merlin might not notice this, and I began to think that it might be necessary he should.

I crossed his room. I can move like a snake when I would. I have no ability to transport myself magically like almost everyone else I know, so I figured it were best to find someone who did. My only problem was that, in keeping with the family's

general policy of personal secrecy on everything from magic to soufflé recipes, many of them did not even know I existed.

...And for that matter I didn't know the location of their apartments, save for Merlin's, Brand's, Random and Vialle's, and Martin's--which Merlin sometime visited. Random and Vialle's would be hard to reach, with all the work that was going on. So I headed off in the direction of Martin's rooms and slithered under the door when I got there. He had rock posters on most of the walls, as well as the speakers for a magically powered CD player. He, alas, was absent, and I had no idea when he might return.

I went back out into the hall and slithered along it, listening for a familiar voice, checking under doors, into rooms. This went on for some time before I heard Flora say, "Oh, bother!" from behind a door up the hall. I headed in that direction. She was one of the ones privy to my existence.

Her door was closed, but I was able to make my way beneath it into a highly decorated sitting room. She seemed in the process of mending a broken fingernail with some sort of goo.

I crossed the room to her side, maintaining my invisibility, and wrapped myself about her right ankle.

Hello, I said. This is Frakir, Merlin's friend and strangling cord. Can you help me?

Following a moment of silence, she said, "Frakir! What's happened? What do you need?"

I was inadvertently abandoned, I explained, while Merlin was under the influence of a peculiar spell. I need to get in touch with him. I've realized something he may need to know. Also, I want to get back on his wrist.

"I'll give his Trump a try," she said, "though if he's in the Courts I'll probably not be able to reach him."

I heard her open a drawer, and moments later I listened to her fumbling with cards. I tried to tune in on her thoughts as she manipulated them, but I could not.

"Sorry," she said, after a time. "I can't seem to get through to him."

Thanks for trying, I told her.

"When did you get separated from Merlin?" she asked.

It was the day the Powers met in the back hall, I said.

"What sort of spell did Merlin get caught up in?"

One that was hanging fairly free in Brand's quarters. You see, Merlin's and Brand's rooms being next door to each other, he'd entered out of curiosity when the wall fell during the confrontation.

"Frakir, I don't think that was an accident," she said. "One Power or the other probably arranged for things to be so."

Seems likely when one thinks about it, Princess.

"What do you want to do now? I'll be glad to help," she said.

I'd like to find a way to get back to Merlin, I said. He's had a general aura of danger about him for some time--to which I am particularly sensitive.

"I understand," she said, "and I'll find a way. It may take a few days, but I'll figure something."

All right. I'll wait, I said. I've no real choice in the matter.

"You're welcome to stay with me till that happens."

I'll do that, I said. Thanks.

I found a comfortable-looking table and wrapped myself about one of its legs. I went into stasis then, if one needs a word for it. It is not sleep, as there is no loss of consciousness. But there is no thinking in the conventional sense either. I just sort of spread out of my awareness and *am*, until I am needed.

How long I lay coiled in this position, I have no way of telling. I was alone in the sitting room, though I was aware of Flora's breathing next door.

Suddenly, she shrieked. This time, I just loosened myself and dropped to the floor.

As I began hurrying toward the room I heard another voice. "Sorry," it said. "I am pursued. I had no choice but to drop in without invitation."

"Who are you?" she asked.

"Well, I'm a sorcerer," he said. "I was hiding in your mirror, as I have every *night* for a long while. I have this crush on you and I like to watch you as you go about your business."

"Peeping Tom--a voyeur!" she said.

"No," he said. "I think you're a really nice-looking lady, and I like watching you. That's all."

"There are many legitimate ways by which you could have gained an introduction," she said.

"True, but that way might have led to horrible complications in my life."

"Oh, you're married."

"Worse than that," he said.

"What, then?"

"No time now. I can feel its approach," he said.

"What's approach?"

"The guisel," he said. "I sent one to slay another sorcerer, but he disposed of it and sent one of his own after me. Didn't know he was that good. I don't know how to dispose of the things, and it will be oozing through that mirror in a matter of minutes, to destroy us all most nastily. So, this place being Amber and all, is there some hero available who might be anxious to earn another merit badge?"

"I think not," she replied. "Sorry."

Just then the mirror began to darken.

"Oh, it's coming!" he cried.

I had felt the menace it exuded some time before. But then, that is my job.

Now I got a glimpse of the thing. It was big, and wormlike, eyeless, but possessed of a shark-like mouth, a multitude of short legs, and vestigial wings. It was twice again the length of a human, and black, having crisscrossing red and yellow stripes. It slithered across our reflected room, rearing as it came on.

"You imply," Flora said, "in your quest for a hero, that it will make it through that interface and attack us?"

"In a word," said the strange little man, "yes."

When it does, I said to Flora, throw me at it. Wherever I hit I'll stick--and I'll go for the throat.

"All right," she said, "and there's one other thing."

What's that?, I asked.

"Help! Help!" she cried.

It began crawling out through the silver, flower-bordered mirror. Flora unwound me from her ankle and threw me at the thing. It had no real neck, but I wrapped myself about its upper extremity below the mouth and began tightening immediately.

Flora continued to call out, and from somewhere up the hall I heard the sound of heavy footfalls.

I tightened and tightened my grip, but the creature's neck was like rubber.

The sorcerer was moving to exit the room when the door burst open and the tall and husky, red-haired form of Luke entered.

"Flora!" he said, and then he saw the guisel and drew his blade.

On my recent journey with Merlin in the space between shadows I had gained the ability to converse at complex levels. My perceptions--which seem quite different--also became more acute. They showed me nothing special about Luke, the sorcerer, or the guisel, but Werewindle now burned of an entirely different light. I realized then that it was not merely a blade.

As Luke moved to position himself between Flora and the guisel, I heard the sorcerer say, "What is that blade?"

"'Tis called Werewindle," Luke replied.

"And you are...?"

"Rinaldo, King of Kashfa," Luke said.

"Your father--who was he?"

"Brand--Prince of Amber."

"Of course," the sorcerer said, moving again toward the door. "You can destroy that thing with it. Command it to draw energy while you're using it. It has a virtually limitless supply to draw upon."

"Why?" Luke asked.

"Because it isn't really a sword."

"What is it then?"

"Sorry," the sorcerer said, regarding the guisel, which was now moving toward us. "Out of time. Got to find another mirror."

I could tell that he was, unaware of my presence, really teasing Luke, because I had figured it out for myself and knew it would take only a moment to tell him, if one could speak.

Then I was disengaging and dropping as fast as I could, for Luke was swinging Werewindle, and I'd no desire to be severed. I really did not know what would happen if this were to occur--if both segments would wind up as wise, witty, and conscious as myself; or, perhaps, whether I would be destroyed in the process. And having no desire to learn this information firsthand, flight seemed most prudent.

I hit the floor before the blow fell. A section of the guisel's head also dropped, still writhing. I squirmed toward Luke's nearest ankle. Flora picked up a heavy chair and brought it down on the thing's back with considerable force, despite her broken fingernail. And she swung it a couple of more times, with some effect, while Luke was in the process of cutting it in half.

I found my way to where I was headed, crawled up, and caught hold.

Can you hear me, Luke? I tried then.

"Yes," he replied. "What are you?"

Merlin's strangling cord, Frakir.

Luke swung at the hind section then as it whipped toward



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February/October 1995

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him, tiny legs clawing. Then he whirled and halved the attacking forepart. Flora struck its rear end again with the chair.

I know what the sorcerer knew, I said.

"Oh, what's that?" he asked, slicing off another section and slipping on its gooey exudations as he retreated.

You might well be able to draw enough energy through Werewindle to destroy a world.

"Really?" he said, struggling to regain his feet as a section of the creature thrust itself upon him. "All right."

He touched it with the point of his blade and it withdrew from him as if shocked. Then he rose to his feet.

"You're right," he said. "There's something to it." He touched the attacking segment again and it vanished in a burst of blue fire. "Flora! Get back!" he cried.

She did, and he proceeded to incinerate the section that had been about to attack her. Then another that came at him.

"I'm getting the hang of it," he said, turning to get another segment. "But I'm not quite sure why it works this way."

It's not just a sword, I said.

"What is it, then?"

Long before there was Werewindle, it was the spikard Rawg.

"Spikard? Like that strange ring Merlin picked up?"

Exactly.

With rapid moves then, Luke disposed of the rest of the guisel.

"Thanks, Frakir," he said, "for telling me how the thing worked. I'd better try a quick search for that sorcerer now, though I've a hunch he disappeared into the nearest mirror."

I'd guess that, too.

"What was his name?"

He didn't say.

"It figures."

"Flora," he continued, "I'm going to look for that sorcerer. I'll be back in a bit. Good show."

She gave him a smile and he departed. Needless to say, the sorcerer did not turn up.

"Wonder where he came from, beyond the mirror," Luke asked.

I've no idea, I replied. *I think I might be more interested in the person who sent that thing after him.*

Luke nodded.

"What now?" he asked.

I guess we tell Flora that her Peeping Tom has hit the road, I said. *You're a sorcerer. Any way of fixing her mirrors so he can't pull that routine again?*

"I think so," Luke said, moving to the nearest window and looking out. "I'll fix them in just a bit. What about you?"

I'd like to get back to Merlin.

"I can't send you through by Trumps if he's in the Courts--and I suspect he is."

What about Werewindle?

"I still don't know exactly how it works. I'm going to have to practice some with it."

Uh--why are you here? I asked.

"Had to talk to Vialle about a number of things," he said, "and she told me that Corwin might be by soon--and she offered me room and board if I wanted to wait for him for a few days."

Well, if you can wear me till he gets here maybe I can persuade him to take me with him. I've a feeling he'll be seeing Merlin again soon.

"I might, too, but it's hard to say at this point."

Okay. We can work it out when the time comes.

"What do you think is going on, anyway?"

Some horrible Wagnerian thing, I told him, full of blood, thunder, and death for us all.

"Oh, the usual," Luke said.

Exactly, I replied.

PW

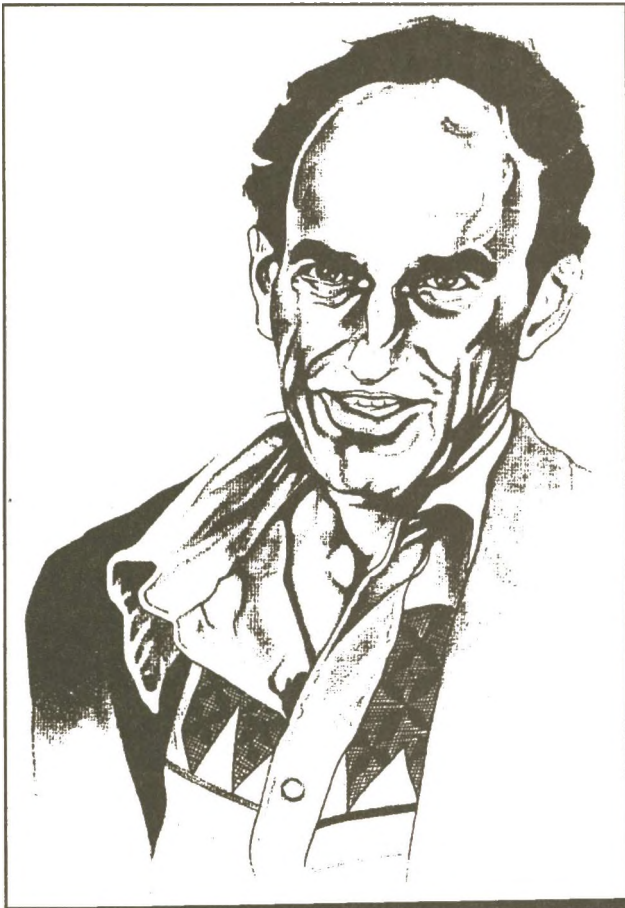
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Steve Carper's fiction has appeared in *Asimov's*, *Tomorrow*, *Galaxy* and many others. About *Goggle A Frog*, *Kiss A Prince* he writes, "My inspiration for this story came from Joel Garreau's must-read book *Edge City*, certainly. Which made me wonder, if *Edge Cities* are the world's future, and *EC's* are middle class bastions, then whither cyberpunk, which concerns itself only with the fringes on class lines. So a middlebrow cyberfuture seemed like the perfect opening to spoof the middle class and cyberpunk--and everything else--all at once."

Can love be simulated?

Goggle A Frog, Kiss A Prince

MIRROR PANELS ON the METAVEC Corporation's lowrise glass-iceberg suburban/Edge City headquarters reflect a bloody sky under a setting sun. Poisonous contrails from a screaming blastplane spew a particulate shower on everyone in the unprotected outdoors. Which means only Sclera, stuck in the open, running the well-lit buzz-cut corporate lawn.

Sclera: non-driver from the metro's Innercore, deposited on a far crossroads corner by the hourly public transit electrobus. One short-cut later she's crossing the acres of browning grass and almost onto the long, long curving entranceway. Temporarily covetous, she watches singlecars pull cozily up the semicircular driveway to disgorge their solitary occupants directly into METAVEC's vast covered vestibule. She needs a distraction, finds one in the improbable number of petunias like so many waving stacks of dollars landscaping the otherwise desolate land. How do they keep them alive? Probably fertilized with the bodies of those who fail to penetrate the security scans, she thinks, and finally has a laugh to bring her back to herself.

Electroradiation from those same security devices covers the ground in a syrupy bath, as thick and sticky as the October air, mutating, just about visibly, the grass

BY STEVE CARPER

Illustrated by Michael Apice

under her boots. Exactly like METAVEC's commercials pollute the kilochannels of the cable systems, and with the same twisting results. Sclera likes the parallel and expands it colorfully, wordchips filling her brainscreens with choice, neatly phrased, perfectly parsed invective.

She stores each screen, fodder for the morrow's column. Her rep is built blasting the whole suburban setting and the notion of mall-life culture. Sclera is what she is, and what she is is a critic, so she criticizes and does it well. And with a slight bias? Well, yes. Nothing else in life, after all, is fair.

At the door the security geek in her natty, nasty uniform blazer stiffens into watchful waiting, reruns of Sclera's grass trek looping on scanscreens, proof she was where she wasn't invited. But with a big evil grin on her face, Sclera silently fishes the coveted invitation out of a back pocket. Moisture warps it, making it stick to the gum on the envelope flap, slightly spoiling the effect. But the look on the guard's face when she takes the thick embossed card, as if it were scraped off a shoe, makes the whole, long grubby run worth every bead of sweat.

The security cop returns the invitation, holding it by its least contaminated corner. "Level B, Room 0023,



straight ahead, down the escalator, to the right," she recites. Sclera salutes, giving the guard a whiff of the real outdoors world, cracking her plastic features. "There's a freshening station in the ladies' room on level A," the guard whispers as Sclera passes, one sweet fleet second of human contact. Sclera winks her thanks.

Blasts of chilled air freeze Sclera's blouse to her body as she walks through the air curtain into the building. Meaninglessly huge lobby, full of ornamentation, devoid of style. Huge posters and giant-sized representations of METAVEC software creatures ogle her from alcoves and balconies. 'Leering gargoyles of modern gothic secular religious absolutism,' Sclera writes on a brainscreen, then edits it out. Clichéd.

The Edge City critics, her colleagues, her newsmates, her fellows, all proudly waving invites of their own, pour through the lobby and onto the underlit transparent walking-on-air escalator. They hold back, give her space, clump into tight groups as if she were the underworld's largest erythrocyte antigen contaminating a blood sample. Just before Level B Sclera gets that grin on her face again. She hurries down the escalator's empty treads toward a clump, precipitating an ungainly rush of packed bodies off the bottom step.

Peeking out of the tangled pile of arms and legs is a maybe familiar face. Yes. Sclera steps daintily over him, then turns and freezes a remembrance image onto a brainscreen. Yes, he is the savager of her Innercore art friends. Sweet. She hypernotes herself to hardcopy his glare of terror and fury and pass it round. Sweet, indeed.

From the escalator's last tread drifts Incus Major, elegantly swirling around his lanky body the quilted longcoat suitable to the frigidly air-conditioned climate-controlled interior temperature. He ostentatiously helps the last one of the fallen to his feet, brushes him off, sends him on his way. Sclera composes her face, ready for battle.

"Don't criticize the critic, sugar, critique the craft," he says

to her at last.

"And that means?"

"If you don't like the way he blows, do better."

"He blows hard, but not too loudly," Sclera says. "Much like you."

"Don't ever compare the two of us. We run along parallel tracks."

Sclera sneers. "Same station, though. Same terminal."

Incus sneers back. He can carry off a sneer, rare outside the Innercore, where sneers are as daily a necessity as tokens. "Influence doesn't come from the lonely voice shrieking in the wilderness," he intones.

"Better that than a chorus all spouting the same braindead lines."

"I've heard you singing in your own choir, your audience of hundreds that look just like you, think just like you, sneer just like you. Perfect recycling. One column, carefully preserved, can last a critical lifetime."

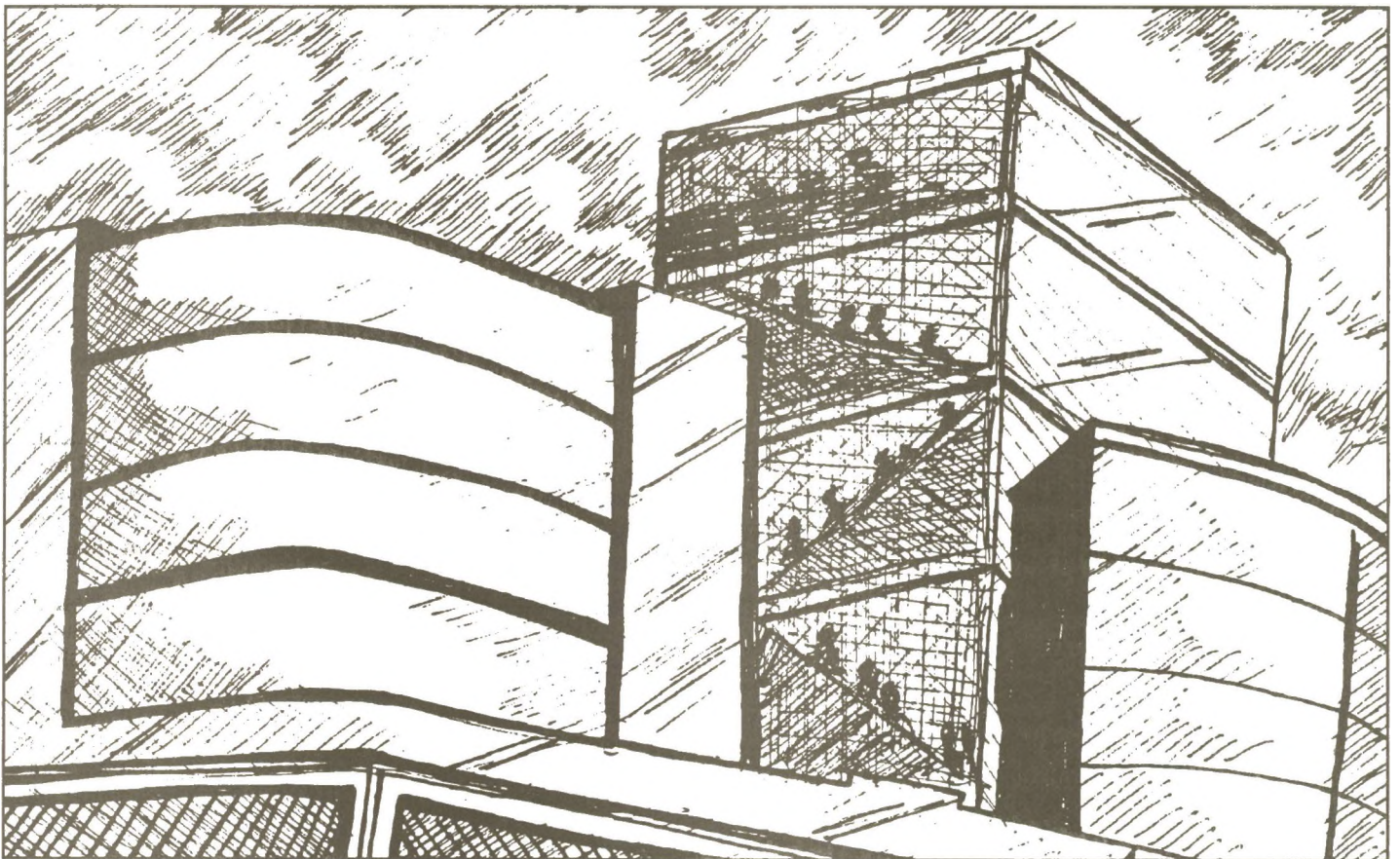
"Unlike some which don't even last as long as it takes to scroll the page."

"Poseur."

"Middlebrow." Last word out, Sclera pivots as well as one can pivot in heavy boots and stalks away.

"Invitations out, everyone," says the METAVEC host at the door to 0023 mechanically. As each hand proffers the thick card he activates an embedded chip. "This will lead you to an assigned seat. Take that seat only and insert the invite in the slot. The screening will not work for you if you try to sit somewhere else," he says to Sclera as if reading her mind.

The print on the invite fades, a schematic of the room's seating taking its place. One chair in the front row glows. Sclera bops down an aisle, bile automatically flowing from her wordchips. 'Plain Jane totalitarian squared-off boxcar of a room,' she notes. 'Regimented two-by-two-by-two seats of plug-in-drug chairs bolted front-facing toward wall-screen of the great god



tube. Larger-than larger-than-life, smaller-than smaller-than-mind.'

Ping goes a chime as the invite chip meets its seat counterpart. Sclera sinks into the living covering known as Jekyllnhyde, waits for its lumbar, sacral and coccygeals to adjust until the seat snuggles her small frame like a chipdrunk copping a feel at 42nd and 8th. They do comfort well in Edge City.

The slot swallows the invite, then lights half a square on the chair's arm. It stays at half until a body plunks down onto the adjacent seat and slots its own invitation. Sclera turns, gasps. Incus Major gapes back at her. Both heads spin to scan the rest of the room.

Yoked off they all are, heteros and homos properly paired, incorrigible bi's used to fill in as necessary.

"And all the unclean animals shall be brought forward two by two," coos the METAVEC VP standing tall on the stage to a roar of relieved nervous laughter. She dresses in late evening wear à la a prime time soap, a dreamy gown of silver swirls amid pale blue silkiness that she fills--Sclera's eye measures and judges--as well as any tube goddess. Sclera's attributes distribute differently but she does admire the pose. In a visual age, stance communicates, Ameslan to the masses. At the same time, the teacher-waiting-on-unruly-students-impatience reminds her that critics are lowly as parasites: useful as active cultures are to yogurt, and just as manipulable.

"Good evening, I'm G. F. Smith, Geraldine Ferraro Smith for those few of you who don't already know me," the VP says when the room has almost stilled. "Yes, and I'm afraid that does give away my age and my parents' political persuasion," she adds, coaxing laughter from the crowd, still high in dudgeon. "I'm here to tell those few who haven't sat through so many product intros that they automatically disbelieve what I say that you'll *love* what you get to preview tonight. I know you'll love it because it's exactly what you've been asking for." Chuckles bubble their way up from the rows of seats.

She's good. Sclera tries to take notes on what makes her so, gives up. They're on opposite sides of the invisible screen.

"For years now," Smith continues, "you've claimed that by creating our own little worlds through our various virtual reality devices we separate ourselves from one another, lock us in our own heads, drive wedges between people who need to get along in a crowded world. Or as one of you so *aptly* puts it, 'cells die individual screaming deaths yanked from the nutrient bath of central heart-pumped blood.'"

Sclera blushes, mostly because G. F. gets the quote wrong and out of context.

"As the leading manufacturer..."

"One of," some pedanticbody grumbles from the back.

"As one of the leading manufacturers of VRDs," G. F. says utterly cool, voice smooth as her skirt, "we at METAVEC wanted to be the *first* to escape this deadly trap enervating the human spirit."

"And keeping teensumers out of *the* malls," another voice snickers.

"As thousands of teens," G. F. says, not amused, "now in the vast VR courts supporting the economies of our surrounding megamalls will attest, interactive VR is by itself hardly anything new. *Portable* interactive VR has never quite worked as well. We have your clips to prove *that*." Better. The crowd responds, on cue. Sclera's lost in awe. "Tonight that all changes. METAVEC'S *Neuromantic* line is a generation beyond anything on the market."

Here's the heart of the pitch. Nastiness about to come down. Sclera's wordchips churn out slogans to give METAVEC's promo providers screaming fits. 'Dirty up those brains, the soaps are about to scrub you. Tubefill wasted screenless minutes. Plug in, never unsocket to me.'

G. F. presses a button on her wristnewton. "But with VR

you *experience*, not describe; *enter*, not watch. You will not believe until you do it to yourselves." Armslots on every chair zip open. Packets in airdegradable plastic rise, then fizz as the plastic frothes itself back to polychains of invisible molecules. "Please put on your VRDs."

Sclera grabs at the familiar goggles, surprising her fingers with their unexpected weight. Virtual Retinal Display goggles. Virtual Reality Device. Whatever. In this world, going past the initials to the actual words shows above-average education. Acronyms slip and writhe, as fungible as yen.

Sclera loads an image into a brainscreen, hypernoting differences between these goggles and the reference standards in her banks. Note: Wide earpieces fit snugly over entire ears, do not merely rest on top. Note: Thick strap around back of head. Note: EC-style perms and waves get crushed by strap; another victory for my short hair. Note: A long male-socketed cable trails off from a left earpiece.

"We're still battling with the FCC about shielding on the final wireless product." G. F. is right there with an answer to the crowd's unspoken quizzation. "These beta devices have to be plugged together to work. Your seatmate's VRDs are keyed to yours. *I think*," she stage whispers breathily, "that the bondage is the best part. I keep arguing that they should keep the wires for the retailsumers."

Sclera feels G. F.'s smile deep inside sensitive tissue. She manages to squeeze 'Probably could pan pumped-in pheromones from the air' out of her wordchips before she stops caring about whys. One palm slithers along the length of her cable, the other hand brings the mate drooping off Incus's VRD into reach. With trembling fingers she gently sockets her male plug into Incus' female slot. Oh, yes. Reversed symbolism. Obvious. Calculated. And exactly right. Sclera's brainscreens itch, but her brain is enjoying itself miles away. How to corrupt a critic.

From far away she hears G. F.'s voice. "Go anywhere you want. The magic will follow you. Or stay here and make your own magic." Magic. Choice word. She hears it again and again. Magic. Magic...

Mantra magic swirling her senses, Sclera loses her own self. All she wants is to stare into the sensual depths of Incus's mouth, rub up against the reassuring presence of his height, feel the potentially crushing grip of his hand, soft yet sturdy and with just the slightest roughness of callouses at the ends of his typing fingers. And his eyes. She can see his eyes only mistily through the goggles, but they shine with the same light she's sure hers do. And those nasty noises coming from her wordchips can just go away and bother someone else.

"Interesting sensations," Incus says, using his favorite phrase, not a sneer in sight. "But this lovely little room's too limited. We need space to capture what I'm feeling."

Sclera agrees. Oh, yes, lovely room, a dreamy cozy space designed for intimacy. More rebellion from Sclera's wordchips but they have no choice. She sees the world through a VR overlay on top of emotion twisting microchip conditioning that alters nothing, yet transforms everything. The new visions caress her synapses, the VR programming creates its own thoughts. Just for her. For them.

All from twin 10⁻⁴ watt microlaser beams bouncing off the insides of the goggles' lenses and onto retinas, creating highpixel 3D images flashing many thousand frames per second. Flashrom chips program the realtime movable overlay imagery. METAVEC wants their tech known if nothing else. Yeah, richest, most detailed VR ever. Goggle circuitry must be as packed as a megamall parking lot the Saturday before Christmas. But in-processing takes more will than she has. She wipes her brainscreens clean and focuses her entire being on Incus.

"There's nothing I'd rather do than walk with you," she says,

and the wonder of it is that neither of them is surprised at the words and the lightning doesn't strike here on Level B. She is dimly aware of joining the others in a mass exodus into METAVEC'S underground maze, but cares not: each couple is alone in its own shared cocoon.

A mall shuttle, sensing passengers, silently stops. Sclera and Incus pile on, followed by a dozen more, squeezed in, all touching flesh. Unlike on the escalator, she is one of them, part and parcel. Sclera laughs with delight, and the others follow as the overlit tunnel walls rush past, billboards and trendads beckoning with promises of coming delights.

And then they slide through the event horizon of the megamall, suburban black hole, five miles long, five hundred feet high, the size of an old city core. A thousand stores and shops, and more, banks and barbers and bowling alleys and bathing beaches and so on through our alphabet and future alphabets yet to come, complete in and of itself. Heavier, denser than anything for miles around, by the immutable laws of human gravity it pulls everyone into its maw, just as its erstwhile rival, the downtown, once did. 'Theme park cathedral, idol to commerce god, all-day, all-night black masses frustrated by lack of shopping virgins to sacrifice,' automatically blips Sclera's brainscreens, quoting one of her most reprinted columns. The thought vanishes in an instant shorter than Planck time.

For today, doubts about her rightness and her righteousness seep into her wordchips, dripping blotches of cleansing approval onto her most acid-laced clips. Today the mall seems nice. Nice?

"Nice," Sclera says as they hop off the shuttle deep in the heart and pith of the mall. She has to believe her eyes, and her eyes see twin laser visions of perfection squared, and for once she slows down long enough to take a thorough look around.

"There's a there here," she says at last, wondering who in this world is talking with her voice.

"Built by Darwin and the free market, just like the Innercore," Incus says. "What we want we get, so what we get must be what we want."

He plucks a double cappuccino trifle from a passing cart and floats it between their mouths so they can both bite in at once. The tart sweetness melts into Sclera's pores, following trails of already existing liquid heat down the underside of her skin.

And those tingles come from, of all things, stores, mass-plastic-tastefree-kitsch-filled-cookie-cutter chain stores. Brainscreens battling furiously and futilely against their siren call, Sclera drags Incus, *she drags Incus*, into each and every one, lusting.

"Incredible," she says of the groups of bonsai redwoods at Family Tree.

"Genetically altered," Incus proudly explains. "No longer needs work to keep them small and perfect."

"Useful," she notes of the self-microwaving dinnerware at What a Dish!

"Self-heating food is next," Incus says, eyes glowing.

"Stylish" and "Ingenious" and even "Cute" she burbles from the chipshocked surface of her mind as she and Incus wander up levels and down, back and forth, round and round. Malls have no ends, just middles.

"We've taken crowds and civilized them," Incus says, pointing to the vast multitudes drifting through the hundreds of acres of megamall, past the modular wicker backyard barbecue ensemble at The Mark of Cane, past the faddish NeoGreek Revival jewelry at MultiMedea, past Jack Spratts, the Simplesse outlet store. "Here are no side alleys, no screaming traffic, no gangs."

"And no way out. We've circled so many times that the faces are becoming familiar," Sclera says.

"They're here because the mall's always here, no night, no darkness. Here it's light 24 hours to every day."

"Convenience without challenge."

"Cleanliness and courtesy."

"You reprocess but you don't create," says Sclera, finding a bit of her old self.

"Edge Cities are no longer alternative, no longer Edge. Tomorrow's cities *are* today's, made better."

"Newer," Sclera says. "Only newer."

"This is the future. People have voted with their feet. No one is going back."

True enough, Sclera sighs, but to herself. In the meantime she gushes over the sublime perfection of Trigger Happy, the Roy Rogers collectibles chain.

As they drift hand in hand by twenty-three consecutive shoe stores, heel to toe, each narrowly nitching a market shaved as close to the center as a Big Two political party, Sclera achieves a zen epiphany. "Malls," and she freezes the heresy on a brainscreen in shaky letters, "are an end to themselves."

'Pull Our Wool Over Your Eyes,' proclaim the signs at the Sheepish Grins sweater shop. A little piece of Sclera's brain goes, 'yeah, exactly.' But her pleasure centers process an enhanced reality, reinforced many thousand frames a second, and her world contracts to a vivid fantasy of she and Incus shopping together, each store a potentiality of he gifting her, she pleasing him, gliding the mall forever, just the two of them. Neuroromance with a vengeance.

So rude indeed is the shock when a teenpack careening corridors blitzes them near FoodCourt 3.

"New VRDs. 'Some!' sighs a longhair in side-laced skintights.

"Cast a peep on their eyes." An emblem-clad mall mouse waves an enthusiastic hand in front of their faces. "Shine those beams on me."

A dark-fabriced figure in retroboots scowls, young face converting it into a pout. "That's Sclera. I buzz her visage from the Innercore nets. So why you walk yoked to moldy middlebrow Major?"

Sclera remembers her hand held by Incus'. She edges off, tautening the connecting cable.

"Just a new product betatest drive," she says. "Marketed to the megamall masses. You go where the flow is thickest." She adds with a serrate edge to her voice, "Don't critique the critic, sugar." A backrecord from a wordchip reminds her where she had heard that phrase. Sclera looks at Incus and blushes. Twice in one evening. A new all-time record. And she knows that a blush looks especially good on her.

"Hey, buzz that roseate glow. Must be a *meaningful* relationship," a crossdresser snickers. The rest laugh, loose, easy, at home.

Incus focuses his goggles' glare on Sclera, eyes shining. "Run a hyperreference between our columns tomorrow," he says to the pack. "You'll understand then what we understand now."

The dark one's scowl deepens. "Message to all teensumers. Sclera resides high in Co-opt City. For alternate viewpoints consult your cable listings. 5757 channels and still nothing on."

Romance or no, Sclera grabs a wave of tightly teased hair and the front of a black polyshirt, a Mall-Mart version of her own hand-crafted blouse. She pulls the teen close and threatens a handslap across pudgy cheeks. "My brain is still my own," she says. She looks at her outfit, head-to-toe black, imitated and mutated on the teen's body. "But I'll have to do something about my clothes."

"All the nonconformists conform," comes another snicker from the crossdresser. "Depend on it."

"Look who's narrowcasting," Sclera says. She has her hand launched in a face intercepting orbit when Incus steps between them.

"Violence is reserved for the Innercore," he reminds her.

Incus points toward a copcart threading its way through hordes of mallcontents. "The security geeks are about to review your performance most unfavorably."

"Rerun season. I already have a lifeban from them." Still under the romantic spell she pauses, dramatically. "Now we'll have one together."

Incus pales beneath his deep discount drugstore tan. "Suggestions?"

"FoodCourts are plotted for direct outside access," cries the mall mouse, smallest but most experienced of them all. "Just between SubTotals and the Janis Joplin hologram by Pizza My Heart."

"There's a full moon cloudpeeping tonight," Sclera says.

Sclera's doppelganger tugs on her sleeve. "The copcarts cometh. Blitz out of here now. We'll lose them."

The teenpack careens through the tray-carrying masses, one in each direction. Sclera and Incus dash for the door, unnoticed. They burst through into the floodlit dark and run headlong away from the mall.

The world whirls while flashrom in the VRDs' chips resequence overlay programming. Sclera holds her breath as reality gets reprocessed right before her eyes. Someone at METAVEC has thought about this. Suddenly ranks of dusty cars in the short-term lots gleam into fairy chariots waiting to whisk home the happy revelers inside. Farther into the distance, the hulking long-term stackgarages and the feathering of motels and sleepalongs that cling to megamall orbit like puppies dangling from teats soar into castles and palaces aglitter with light.

Sclera, shopped out, no longer buys the pitch. "Outside at last," she says jubilantly. "Unrecirculated fume-filled air free from the tang of security geeks and subliminal shopping music. We're in my world now."

"We're still on their property." Incus shakes his head, but a smile stays fixed on his face. "I never understood before how a little danger could spice a passing attraction into closeness." He pulls Sclera into his arms. Behind his back a doubledoor rolls back to allow a copcart through.

"More spice coming," Sclera says, slipping backwards as far as their leash would permit. "Cayenne at the very least if it catches us. I've seen the insides of their holding celars. Romantic is not the word."

None of this is properly covered by the programming. Incus' face falls, the lack of preprocessed choices sneaking its way past his smile defenses. "We should return to METAVEC," he says. "I understand there's a electrobus stop somewhere around here."

Sclera's brainscreens light, picturing Incus of singlecar splendor on a crowded bus. But it's not to be. "After working hours buses just don't run between here and there."

Clouds part to reveal a golden moon

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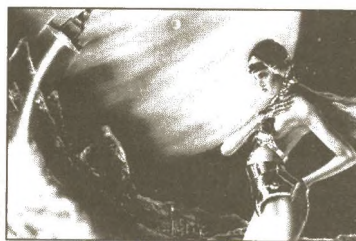
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pouring molten light. 'Long loony moon, easy to let love cocoon one's honey, moon of a million miles.' The song erupts from Sclera's wordchips. She's enjoying this. She says, "We could walk to METAVEC."

"Outside? In the dark? Without a...?" Sclera adores the tremors in Incus' voice.

Remaining pheromones scratch invisible itches. She sidles until her hair lies between Incus and the moon. She can almost feel a golden halo anoint her. "This is how we do it in the Innercore."

Incus holds out an arm. Sclera takes it. In seconds the megamall diminishes behind them, copcarts vainly circling.

By the time they reach the ring access road METAVEC can be seen in the distance directly ahead. The spotlight iceberg wavers in the exhaust-fumed air rising between them and it. The overlays, overjoyed to engage a target, turn it into an attainable grail. Only 14 lanes of XWay block their path.

"Where's the overpass?" Incus asks.

Sclera queries. "About a mile down there," she says, reading off a brainscreen. "We don't need it. We're on an adventure. Nobody's kept the fences intact for years."

"You can't.... We can't...." Incus keeps starting sentences he can't finish. Instant adaptability is not a necessary skill in Edge City. Finally, "Run across an XWay?"

"Probably easier than crossing Fifth Ave. at noon. I'll take your hand so we don't separate." Sclera holds out her left hand. Incus cradles it with his right. It's right, the crowning touch. They run.

Brainscreens piggyback on WCAR trafficsignal reports beamed to the celltel receivers. Traffic light at this hour, probably not more than a twenty minute backup. Sclera weaves a path behind stopped electrocars and H₂buggies, trying to minimize fumes. She waves to drivers distracted by reportwatching on their dashboard tubescreens, drinks in the blank startlement on their faces as she passes. One autojockey with Innercore plates fingers a horn hello as they cut in front of his car; others just finger.

"Home away from home," Sclera says as they pant their way to the other side, cacophony driving jagged edges into the thick, liquid air.

"Your world and welcome to it," Incus says. He looks less sure of the attractions of adventure.

They scramble up the gentle hill toward a familiar target. Sclera feels giddy.

"Race you to the door," she says. She lets go of Incus' hand and takes off. He follows clumsily, mallmocs slipping on the grass. Halfway across, pale and unprotected in the midst of nothingness, he falls. The cable connecting them parts.

Sclera's brain twists as her eyes retreat back to seeing nothing but the real world. Brainscreens fast-forward a replay of the evening's highlights. Sclera sighs, gets mad, double emotions on top of emotions. Media manipulates, truism. That said, doesn't mean the results have to be false. Sclera's eyes have been opened. But METAVEC could have asked for surrender, instead of sneaking control past her brain. The goggles work, the concept buzzes. But they had to go load the deck.

Too bad for what could have been. Now it's back to the Innercore, many universes away, in the realer reality.

Sclera looks down at Incus, sees the real him. Not bad if you like the type. But no one to be chained to for life. 'End the pain of reality with our rose-colored glasses,' spew Sclera's wordchips, now free to hypertalk. 'Stay plugged through life with Perfect Partner. Goggle a frog, kiss a prince.'

METAVEC security wouldn't be expecting anyone cutting across the grass at this hour. Their cells, 'blood cells,' were even less attractive than the malls'. Sclera tears off her goggles, lets the night breezes--gravid with electroscans--caress her eyes

and ears. She tosses the goggles to Incus.

"We'll always have the megamall, Incus," she says. "Our wants and desires don't mean a hill of beans in this world. Return these for me, will you? I've got a bus to catch." Incus looks blankly at her. No glow emanates from star-crossed eyes.

The ground erupts with scanlights and crawlybuggies, like worms after a spring rain. The vast open lawn wriggles with motion.

Wordchips spew their Innercore songs as Sclera runs across the now ultralite corporate lawn. She flits across METAVEC's lot line, sneaks one last backward glance. She's leaving the Edge City world in full frenzied motion. And the petunias look hungry tonight.

PW

OLD DOGS

For Robert-the-Bruce gentleman, small battle-dragon, great-heart...

What is it you fear in the dark, old dog?

That makes you flare your cheeks and
sniff the air?

What is it you hear in the dark, old dog?

That makes your ears go up when
the lights go out?

I lay down with you to look for calm...

But the sound is so strong

and the sights so red I see

right through your head to the battles

there (back there where we...)

And the red glare of rockets--

Cries and shrieks and howls

of wounded men and aliens and animals--

The smell of fear right here near at hand and foreign

sweat and the spread and spill and spray

of hot adrenaline--

And blood the least of viscera...

Peace, old friend.

You and I have translated through.

We don't have to do that anymore.

Let's just lie here on our blanket

on the rug on the floor

And go to sleep--

deep dog sleep--

And not dream of war--

That's why we're here, we've

done that bit, our bit

and needn't anymore.

- Kyle Christopher

Words & Pictures



by Darrell Schweitzer



In Which a Wandering Column Finally Finds a Home

Greetings to the readers of *Pirate Writings*.

This column may already seem familiar. It ran for years in Doug Fratz's late, lamented, Hugo-nominated *Quantum: Science Fiction in Review* (formerly *Thrust*), and then was to be continued in *Tekeli-Li!* just as that journal changed its name to *It: The Journal of Insidious Terror* and made the jump into newstand distribution.

That didn't happen. As far as I can tell, the editor of *Tekeli-Li!* a.k.a. *It* has been carried off by space aliens.

So here I am. Many of you may know me already, but for the benefit of those who don't, let me sketch in the basics. I am the author of about 150 published short stories and three novels, and also editor of *Worlds of Fantasy & Horror* magazine (which used to be *Weird Tales*), and book reviewer for such journals as *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Necrofile*, and *The New York Review of Science Fiction*.

So, what am I doing here? Critics, as Alexei Panshin and I once worked out, are appointed by God: one day a burning bush said to me, "Go thou and review films."

But my literary bias shows. I don't buy the claim that film is its own unique medium and should be judged only by its own standards. That's fine if the audience is illiterate, but otherwise storytelling is storytelling and a film has quite a lot in common with a novel: plot logic, convincing characterizations, ideas, and so on. Literate audiences demand a little bit more.

Hence, I offer you a biased and specialized column aimed at a specialized audience: movie viewers who read, who enjoy both Words and Pictures.

Prospero's Dracula

It may take years to settle the matter. After two viewings I am unable to make up my mind whether Francis Ford Coppola's sumptuous *Bram Stoker's*

Dracula (Columbia Pictures, 1992) is High Art, an intriguing neo-Gothic, neo-Expressionist excursion (the word "masterpiece" comes to mind, but inappropriately) or much cinematic expertise wasted on High Kitsch.

It certainly isn't Bram Stoker, Coppola's numerous protestations of authenticity and devotion to the original text to the contrary. His *Dracula* is no more the "true story" than *Frankenstein*. *The True Story* was authentic Mary Shelley. It is, if anything, despite a dogged determination to reproduce incident after incident straight from the book, the most variant *Dracula* yet.

Think of it as the vampiric version of *Prospero's Books*. Peter Greenaway's gorgeous, ultimately self-overwhelmed rendition of *The Tempest*, wherein every shot, every sequence, seemed taken from some surrealistic dream of live-action Renaissance paintings and--for all it made sense in terms of the whole thing being a tempestuous outpouring from the magic-soaked mind of Prospero--the viewer longed for the occasional realistic scene of shipwrecked 17th century people, in plain, not riotously fanciful costumes, on a real beach. *Bram Stoker's Dracula* has considerably less excuse for failing to touch down in prosaic, Victorian reality, but fail it does: the outdoor sets are so obviously sound-stages, the train steaming through the Carpathians so obviously a miniature, the 1890's London in its own way as fantastic as Castle Dracula. Only in movies like this do English ladies wear almost luminous nightgowns designed by some ancestor of Frederick's of Hollywood or, worse yet, stroll calmly off the street into a silent movie exhibition of *pornography*! Not that vice didn't prosper back then, but it was discreetly hidden, so that respectable appearances might deceive, which was one of the themes of the Stoker novel missing in this film.

There is nothing of "respectable appearances" here. Coppola has created an

entirely new set of Dracula images, owing nothing to Stoker and virtually nothing to prior films. An old man with a drooping moustache, dressed all in black? Hardly. Before a drop of the red revitalizes him, Coppola's Count (Gary Oldman) looks like a demented approximation of a giant rodent impersonating a Renaissance Venetian Doge, very possibly in drag, sporting an incredible coiffure (who, or *what* is Dracula's hairdresser?) and a bright red cloak several times the length of his own body. (How does he keep it clean? Doesn't it get stuck in doors?) He transforms several times into impressive monsters. Youthened Dracula, in London, might best be described as a Byronic hippie, right down to the granny glasses.

(You may well wonder precisely what service the madman Renfield--Tom Waits raving and gibbering to make the ghost of Dwight Frye proud--renders the Count in exchange for all those wiggly, scurrying treats? You won't find out here. *This* dapper Dracula doesn't require a lunatic to invite him into human society.)

What this film needed, what *Prospero's Books* needed, what *Edward Scissorhands* in its own way managed to achieve, was *contrast*. Sure, *Bram Stoker's Dracula* is a technical marvel, something Coppola wastes no opportunity in reminding us, every time we notice that his camera is shooting through a peacock's fan, or that the Count's shadows don't match his motions. There is a *great* shot of Dracula scurrying down the outside of the castle, head downward, in the posture and with the motions of a rat. (Right out of Stoker, yes, but silly when you start wondering why Dracula's cape doesn't fall down over his head in that position.) But Coppola, like so many other film-makers before him, has failed to grasp an underlying principle of fantasy: the unreal must be framed in the real. The supernatural must exist in the context of the mundanely convincing, the utterly, so that it seems an *intrusion*. All well and good that Castle Dracula should give Jonathan Harker a bloody and erotic experience out of some lunatic's dream, but this will inevitably dissolve into self-conscious camera angles and effects on display unless we see a *real* railroad train and *real* Transylvanian countryside, then return again to a *real* London, where Harker may seem safe, awakened from the dream, until, to his horror, it all starts happening again.

Contrast. Between the real and the unreal. None of that here. Instead, *Bram Stoker's Dracula* opts for a "fairy tale," "once upon a time" look which completely vitiates its power. Nothing horrifies, for all we are treated to a gorgeous parade of Gothic images. The cast (Oldman as

Dracula, Anthony Hopkins as a decidedly eccentric Van Helsing, Keanu Reeves as Harker) are so completely overwhelmed by the visual effects, by sets, costumes, everything, that you have to stop and think, yes, these are probably pretty good performances. Worse yet, in a 15th century prologue (a gory fairy tale, with battle scenes like a series of animated, red-tinted Kay Nielsen silhouettes) Dracula is established as a Romantic Lover, who renounced God over the loss of his True Love. Ladies swoon for him. More like a character out of Haggard than Stoker, he has been searching through the centuries for the reincarnation of his Beloved. (Guess who.) There is no sense of *evil* anywhere in the film, except possibly in the very striking encounter between Reeves and Dracula's three "wives," who are seductive, destructive, and devouring. In the end Mina (Winona Rider) saves the Count's dignity, gives him peace, and weeps for him. Stoker would be among the last to recognize the final scenes.

It's a visual feast, a fantastic art gallery of a film, but it is not Stoker and it is barely Dracula. It is certainly not, hype to the contrary, the definitive anything.

After over a hundred Dracula films, we still haven't one fully worthy of, or faithful to Bram Stoker's novel. What is the best? I still hold out for The Horror of Dracula (Hammer, 1958) which, despite cheesy production values and occasional plot stupidities, still delivers a horrific jolt the Coppola extravaganza cannot. If Terrence Fisher ever framed a shot through peacock feathers, I didn't notice.

A Plethora of Television Skiffy

Another thing this column does is monitor science fiction and fantasy on television. I'm not going to review every episode, but I will try to draw your attention to series or specials that may be worth a look.

There's more SF on television than ever before. We ageing Baby Boomers can actually remember times, incredible as it seems, when there was *no* science fiction on the tube. Now there is more than I, at least, can keep up with.

Some can be dismissed quickly. Odd how many of them seem to be old Boomer shows repackaged for Generation X. Sea Quest only reminds us how good Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea really was. Earth II compares unfavorably to Lost in Space. Sliders, from what I've seen of it, is Time Tunnel all over again, for all the heroes are going *sideways* between alternate universes rather than back and forth between stock footage from old movies.

So far I haven't got much use for Star Trek: Voyager, also known as Star Trek:

Politically Correct. They've got black Vulcans now, which makes one wonder how a species with copper-based blood, evolved on another planet under different conditions, just happens to have precisely the same racial groups we do. Having one of the (non-Vulcan) characters be an American Indian just shows how American-centered the Star Trek universe really is. If minorities from all over the Earth, rather than just from the United States, are to be represented, where are the Kalihari Bushmen, Lapps, Ainus, and Tierra del Fuegians? That there would be a woman captain is, of course, not particularly startling, but Kate Mulgrew's character has yet to develop much personality, and she has a *voice* which answers one of those pressing childhood questions (right up there with "Who was Casper the Friendly Ghost before he died?"): What will Alvin and the Chipmunks sound like when they grow up?

The worst thing one can say about Star Trek: Voyager is that, for all the ship has been bounced to the other side of the galaxy, all of these episodes could have fit in easily to any the previous Star Trek series. The plots are primarily New Age mystical, with only a thin veneer of pseudo-science. One recent one had Captain Kate seeking her animal spirit guide. (In fairness to our Mediterranean heritage, will she be reading entrails in a future episode?)

And even on the other side of the galaxy, an alien is just a human with an attitude and a facial problem, and they all speak English. When confronted with a menace, all too often, Captain Kate huffs mightily...and does nothing, sending the offenders on their way with a few sharp words.

Never mind. The Emily Litella school of plotting continues. (In previous columns I have demonstrated the clear influence of Saturday Night Live on Star Trek. The Ferengi are Killer Bees. Deanna Troi is Roseanne Roseannadanna. Emily Litella, the old lady who ended all her muddled tirades with a loud "Never mind!" is story editor.

(On the further subject of Star Trek, how many of you think Captain Kirk is really dead? As dead as Superman? Sure to be back as soon as the money is good? Star Trek: Generations left not a wet eye in the house, unless somebody had a cold. We *know* that the Captain will be back, that the Nexus, that cosmic string-cheese filled with possibilities for cop-outs, will provide some variant of "It was all a dream" when the time comes. *The Captain died on the bridge*, yes, on a rusty metal walkway, actually, under such contrived circumstances that the old Captain Kirk would have gotten away without a scratch, were not the Script so determined to shuffle him off this mortal coil for a while.

Never mind.)

I confess I'm a little fonder of Deep Space Nine, mostly because Quark the Ferengi provides needed moments of parody.

What's worth watching on TV? The new Outer Limits. Babylon Five. The X-Files.

Out of three episodes, I have seen so far, there has been one quite good Outer Limits, written by Alan Brennert, about aliens who come to Earth as refugees, pleading, "Give us your dead." They are symbiotes. They need dead human bodies to occupy, which offers numerous emotional difficulties (and some plot contrivances) for Earth people who see their deceased loved ones walking around *as somebody else*. The other two episodes were far less impressive, one about a supposed immortality serum which actually speeds up the body's regenerative capacity, so the bad guy feels great for a few days, then ages hideously. (I think I read that one in a 1935 Astounding. It wasn't new then.) Another was about a 102-year-old billionaire determined to cheat death, but Death came to get him, in the form of crackling electrical energy which danced all over hospital computers and somehow didn't blow the surge protectors. Old stuff, but well mounted. This show can at least occasionally accommodate a good script.

Babylon Five has had problems with the personalities of its characters. The new chief, who replaced Commander Stick-of-Wood, looks like a Bill Clinton clone and is just as bland as the old one. The Centauri ambassador seems to be a descendant of Larry Fine of the Three Stooges. But some of the plots are actually *science fiction*, far more imaginative than Star Trek. Babylon 5 even has *aliens* which seem to have evolved on *other planets* and have little in common with humanity save their intelligence. What a concept. Wow.

The X-Files is pure *Weekly World News* stuff, built out of contemporary urban legends, UFOlogy, and folklore, which some reality-impaired fans think is *more than fiction*. But taken as fiction, The X-Files is a cross between Kolchak: The Night Stalker and The Invaders, as our plucky pair of FBI agents hunt down aliens, conspiracies, and assorted spooks. Its commonest failing is that in some episodes logic evaporates totally. Endings just stop, rather than conclude. Yet when the story manages to hold together, The X-Files can be genuinely suspenseful and atmospheric. My nomination for best episode is the one in which Mulder and Scully chase a truck carrying a downed alien across the country, only to discover that the Conspiracy makes a point of *killing* extra-terrestrials immediately after questioning.

Another new Fox Network show, VR .5,

combines Star Trek's New Age mysticism with The X-Files's conspiracy paranoia. It's almost interesting. The VR stands for Virtual Reality, an attempt to make this show trendy and "scientific." It's actually about shamanistic spirit-voyaging. You call up somebody on the phone, drop the receiver into an obsolete audio modem, and *boom!* --both caller and listener are off into Dream, plumbing the the participants' subconscious. Roger Zelazny did it far more convincingly in The Dream Master back in 1966. One of the great consistency problems in VR.5 is that it's unclear whether the person on the receiving end remembers the experience. And what if he drops the phone in mid-dream? What if the heroine dials a wrong number and gets the answering machine for a Chinese take-out place? Does she end up in the digital wonton soup?

The plots are, as I said, almost interesting. The best one so far was about a G.I. who is on Death Row for betraying his country. Our heroine is nudged by the sinister Committee to find out why. David McCallum, playing the heroine's father, who got killed at the beginning of the first episode, may soon hold the record for being the most steadily-employed dead character in TV history. He shows up a lot more often than the ghost of Hamlet's dad.

We Resume Regular Service

Since much of the purpose of this column is reviewing new films, maybe it would help if I reviewed one. Unfortunately, the deadline for this issue comes shortly *before* the wave of summer films. (Next time, the deluge.)

The word that came to mind after viewing Village of the Damned was "unnecessary." It's not that I'm against remakes. The 1978 Invasion of the Body Snatchers wrought very interesting changes on the original, largely because director Philip Kaufman had enough sense *not* to reshoot Don Siegel's 1956 original scene-by-scene, character-by-character, but to give us a very different take on what would have to be a world-wide phenomenon.

The new Village of the Damned settles for an easy remake. It has one spark of creativity: The alien kids are supposed to come in male/female pairs, but one of the girls is stillborn. The isolated boy doesn't quite fit in. He begins to develop emotions. He gets rescued, providing Carpenter's trademarked--but not very surprising--Ambiguous Ending.

Otherwise, while nobody involved (Christopher Reeve, Mark Hamill,

Kirstie Alley, and a bevy of platinum-blond moppets) disgraces himself or herself (though Reeve in the George Sanders role looks funny at times scrunching up his Supermanish face to resist the aliens' mental onslaught), the film is a mere walk-through of the 1960 version, diminished by a much coarser sensibility. Carpenter's Village of the Damned, like his The Thing, is deadeningly literal, leaving nothing to the imagination. There are, to be sure, lots more explosions, car-crashes, and shootouts in this version, but I do not see the improvement.

There are also *two* hideously-burned corpses, which illustrate something another colleague (Charles L. Grant) once said about explicit gore: If you behead someone on camera, the audience *knows* its not real, and we're left thinking, "Oh, what an interesting fake head. I wonder how they did that?" Rubber, with barbecue sauce, is my guess.

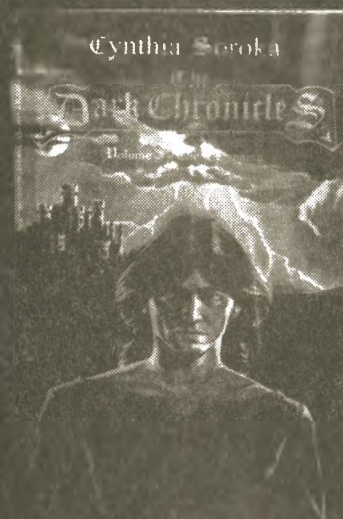
I'm still waiting to see if Mr. Carpenter can make an *original* film half as good as the ones he remakes. If not, he's going to be remembered as the Lin Carter of fantastic cinema.

PW

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Algis Budrys is a cornerstone in the Science Fiction field. He is the author of numerous books including *Who?*, *False Night*, *Man of Earth*, *The Falling Torch*, *Rogue Moon* and most recently *Hard Landing*. His work has also appeared in hundreds of magazines and anthologies.

"Straw" is the first of two stories featuring the character Frank Hertzog. The second, "Due Process" will appear in the Fall '95 issue of *Pirate Writings*. Keep an eye out for it...and keep an eye out for Algis.

In the city of Atlantis crime doesn't pay.

STRAW

BY ALGIS BUDRYS

Illustrated by David Grilla

INEVITABLY, THE CITY WAS CALLED ATLANTIS. Frank Hertzog, of International Tours, Incorporated, stood on the brink of empty air, his toes a hair's breadth away from the out-slanting invisible glass sheet that formed one wall of his office. He looked far out across the ocean, swelling a thousand feet below, and watched the curling tracteries of pleasure-craft wakes upon the deep green water. The white, tall buildings reared upon their piles to either hand, each walled in perfect glass, each tier apparently stacked unsupported in the air. Hertzog was prompted to wonder whether, like its namesake, the city could long keep from sinking into ruin on the ocean floor.

He grinned to himself, and his prominent ears twitched in response. He turned around suddenly, an awkward-looking man full of loose joints, and walked back toward his desk.

The huddled man in the soft visitor's chair asked bitterly, "Is there something funny about me?" He was an old man, with unhealthily sallow skin and deep crows' feet at the corners of

his wet eyes. He had come down to Hertzog's office under escort by ITI special agents, and he had made no move to escape. He was dressed in clothing whose price would have Hertzog's wardrobe for a year, but which seemed to be just a shade out of style.

Hertzog shook his head, still grinning. "I was thinking about something else. Pretty foolish of me, considering how this place's been here for a hundred years."

"I beg your pardon?" the visitor said.

"Not at all, not at all," Hertzog said with an airy wave of his hand, and looked down at his desktop with an expression of mild surprise. "Well, now," he said quizzically, pulling a folder out of the fax. "Your file seems to have gotten here already, Mr. Bliss. They must have hired a new clerk for me." He spread it open on the desktop, pursed his wide lips, and flipped through the pages.

"Arkady Bliss, occupation theatrical entrepreneur, residence Stormking House, Atlantis," he said to himself. "Filed affidavit of theft, twenty International Tours, Incorporated travelers' checks in denomination one thousand, March 18th. Received refund, March 20th. And today is April 1st." He spun the file around and pointed to twenty one-thousand dollar travelers' checks pinned to the inside of the folder. Each had been countersigned and cashed between March 20th and March 31st, in various places around the city, as though Bliss had made a tour for the express purpose of raising cash. ITI's handwriting experts had declared all twenty countersignatures genuine. "April Fool, Mr. Bliss," Hertzog said. "Are those your signatures?"

Arkady Bliss leaned forward and studied them for a long time. Finally he looked up and nodded. His lower lip was quivering slightly.

"Well, now," Hertzog said, "you owe us twenty thousand

dollars, Mr. Bliss. How say you?" He grinned cheerfully at the other man and rubbed together the thumb and fingers of one upraised hand.

"I...I didn't sign those checks," Bliss mumbled. "I told you the truth on my affidavit. They were stolen from me."

"Now, *there*," Hertzog said, pointing a stiff finger at Bliss' face, "is where you're wrong. Even a semi-skilled forger could fake your signature well enough to pass visual inspection. Why, I could do it. But it would really take something to fool our experts, Mr. Bliss. Those are your signatures, done with your pen by your hand. Mr. Bliss. International Tours, Incorporated, cannot very well refund you for stolen checks you then go out and spend. I say again, you owe us twenty thousand dollars. How say you further?"

"I don't know what to say." Bliss rubbed his hand over his eyes. "If I'd known I was going to be called down here and badgered, I wouldn't have filed the claim. I would have taken my loss." The billowing folds of his bright apparel now seemed even more oversized. The jewels on his rings seemed dim and lusterless.

"You couldn't afford to take your loss," Hertzog said gently. "You're broke. How long ago did you hock your gems and replace them with substitutes?"

Bliss jerked his hand down and buried it in the folds of his cloak. Then he gradually edged it out again and glanced down at it with an empty expression. "Several months ago."

"About the same time you bought the checks?"

"I used the money to buy the checks, yes."

"Planning to leave us, Mr. Bliss?"

"What business is it of yours?"

"Why, we're your creditors now, Mr. Bliss," Hertzog smiled. "We care a whole lot about you...your hopes, your dreams, your disappointments--especially those."

He looked down at the file. "Let's go over it all, Mr. Bliss. Three months ago, you paid an ITI subagent at the City National Trust Company twenty thousand dollars plus charges for twenty one-thousand-dollar travelers' checks. You signed each check once, leaving the space for countersignature blank. What you did with the checks immediately thereafter, we don't know. We assume you put them away in a safe place. You certainly didn't use any of them."

"I put them in my safety-deposit box. I said so in my affidavit of loss. You can read it there."

Hertzog nodded agreeably. "Certainly. Certainly. But we've already noticed one discrepancy in your affidavit, haven't we?" He extended a packet across the desk. "Smoke? No? Then I won't either. Now. To continue. You were already in financial difficulty. How do we know? You paid us by personal check, and the check bounced. Your account was five dollars short. You'd failed to allow for a service charge. We agreed to waive that sum, and the bank paid us the difference. We don't sell the checks to make a profit anyhow. It's your travel accommodations we want our piece of. But the bank wouldn't honor your overdraft, Mr. Bliss. That's a tip-off."

"Why should I have just one account?" Bliss flared.

"Why not?" Hertzog shot back. "And what about a credit rating that won't stretch to five dollars?"

Bliss stirred uncomfortably in the chair. "I wonder if you could open the window, Mr. Hertzog? It's hot in here."

"Certainly." Hertzog nudged a button on his desk. A red light blinked up immediately beside it. He frowned and pushed the button again. The light stayed red. He looked up, grimacing. "Sorry, it's busted. Modern engineering know-how, Mr. Bliss." He pushed a carafe over from the corner of his desk. "Drink, instead?"

Bliss shook his head. "No. No, thank you. I'm...I'm all

right now."

"Getting back, now--" Hertzog said. "On March 18th, you came in and spoke to our Mr. Hogan in the Refund Claims office downstairs. You filed an affidavit stating that on the morning of the same day, you withdrew the checks from your safety-deposit box in the City National Trust and that twenty minutes later while you were on a public conveyance, your pocket was picked. You discovered the loss only upon arrival at your destination, wherefrom you came straight to our offices and made your report. You swore the checks had not been countersigned. That is, none of them had been rendered negotiable. On the basis of your affidavit, a refund check was prepared. It was held until the sale of the checks was verified from our records, and until we established that none of the checks had yet been cashed and presented to our bank by the clearing house. The refund check was then delivered to you on the morning of the 20th. A half hour later, the first of the supposedly missing checks was cashed, in the Stormking House casino, with your undisputably genuine countersignature thereon. Mr. Bliss, how say you three times?"

"I can't explain it." Bliss seemed to have gathered himself a little. His weak jaw was set, and his voice was stubborn.

Hertzog sighed. "You produced 'Mermaid's Revel,' didn't you? And 'Fire Fountain'?"

"Yes."

"Smash hits. Multimillion dollar hits. Where's the money, Mr. Bliss?"

"That was three years ago," Bliss said testily.

Hertzog shook his head. "Wine, women, and song--some other producer's song, I hope?"

"Does it matter? What business is it of yours? Look, Hertzog," Bliss said, taking refuge in anger, "there's such a thing as common good manners. I don't think you'd like it if I wrote a letter to your superiors."

"Can't," Hertzog said. "I'm my superiors. I own the whole shebang. President and Chairman of the Board."

Bliss opened his mouth. "But--"

"Why weren't you told who Mr. Hertzog was? Why should you be? I'm just as competent no matter what you call me. What difference would it make in handling your case? Why am I fiddling around with detail work, instead of making Olympian decisions from some golf course? I built this outfit with my own brains and sweat. Am I supposed to let somebody else know more about it than I do?"

"Back to business, Mr. Bliss. What're you going to do now? There's twenty thousand dollars of ITI money tied up in you, and it doesn't bore me to repeat the fact. You're sure you can't account for these signatures?" Hertzog looked sharply at Bliss.

"No!"

"All right. Then you've got a week to pay us back. After that, we go to law. Clear?"

Bliss refused to panic. Perhaps he had exhausted his capacity for it. His face had turned paler, but he stuck to his guns. "I'll do what I can."

"All right, Mr. Bliss," Hertzog said disappointedly. "I'll see you here next Friday, then."

Bliss got to his feet and walked toward the door.

"Mr. Bliss," Hertzog asked, "what was in your mailbox this morning?"

Bliss stopped. He actually seemed to lose control of his knees for a moment. His face broke out in perspiration. "Nothing," he said huskily.

"Nothing? Not even a straw?"

"A what?" Bliss mumbled.

"A straw. What a drowning man clutches at."

"No! No, nothing like that!" Bliss cried and hurried out.

Hertzog studied the closing door. He stabbed a button on

his desk. "Keep tailing him," he said to his desktop. "Stay close. Keep him alive. He already tried to dive out my window." He pressed another stud. "Hoke. Come on by my office." Then he put his feet up on the desk and chewed his lip until Hoke Bannister came in the door.

Hoke Bannister, First Vice President, was a stocky, ugly man who sat on the edge of the desk and said, "Yeah?" "If I don't show up tomorrow, mind the store for us, will you?" "Sure," Bannister said, "but what's up?" He reached for the cigarettes.

"Not those. They're full of neoscopolamine," Hertzog said. He reached in a drawer, pulled out a sealed pack, and tossed it across the desk. "Stay away from the liquor, too." He nudged the Bliss file abstractedly with one toe, frowning at it. "I've got a little setup arranged with the special agents down in Refund Claims. If I turn up missing by tomorrow, check with them and then come looking for me." He used the side of his ankle to push a lighter toward Bannister.

"You know, Hoke, we've got municipal elections coming up next month," he said casually. "What d'you use for politics, anyway?" "Politics?"

"You one of these people that thinks Atlantis ought to stop being just a commercial center, and move in on the mainland nations?"

Bannister snorted, the smoke jetting out of his nostrils. "And get tied down to a bunch of dirt-farm problems we don't even know what to do with? We're a free port, we get our handling commissions, we live mighty well, and we're never going to be hungry. Who wants it any other way? But, why worry? Hardly anybody bothers to vote. Why should they? The City Council never does anything to stir things up."

"I hear things, here and there."

"It's a bunch of guff. Who'd want to rock the boat? It'll never amount to anything."

"Everything's calm and peaceful, huh? Open, aboveboard, and trustworthy?"

"You're leading up to something."

"Me?"

There was a sudden sharp *splat!* as the loaded cigarette exploded an inch from Bannister's nose.

Hertzog grinned. "Well, maybe I was."

Atlantis sparkled in the sun, alive with color and movement, shimmering in reflection from the water. Hertzog watched it fondly all the way down the glass-walled chute and when he jumped off at the company boat landing, he stopped to listen to the sound of boat engines and helicopter fans. Then he dropped into the waiting boat, blipped the throttle, and moved out into a stream of traffic growling along the breadth of Triton Way toward Pleasure House. His motions at the controls were apparently haphazard, but the boat somehow found its way through crannies in the traffic that were opening and closing at considerable speed.

As he guided the boat, he whistled loudly over the sound of the engine and nodded pleasantly to the occasionally startled occupants of the crafts he slipped by.

It was three-thirty. The business houses were closing, and most Atlanteans were headed toward the center of the ten-square-mile city, where the singing tower of Pleasure House shot up thirty levels higher than any other structure, and where the city customarily took its ease.

Hertzog usually stayed down on the lower levels, where the stores were quietly priced and entertainment ranged from pin-ball machines in the drugstores to movies in small fifteen hundred seat theaters. He liked the lower levels. He had been ac-

customed to them in his childhood, and he had explored them until every fruit-juice stand and candy store was as familiar to him as the two room apartment, four hundred feet below sea level, in which he lived now and cost him upwards of a hundred dollars a day in return for isolation and quiet.

As he nosed into a Pleasure House dock, a teak and bronze yacht swept majestically by and rocked him with its wash. "Money, money, money," Hertzog muttered, and jumped up on the dock. He strode along it to the yacht, and leaned against a bollard while its crew moored it and ran out a gangplank for the portly, over-dressed man who stepped ashore.

"Beg pardon," Hertzog murmured as the man passed him.

"Eh?"

"What's your tailor's name?"

The yachtsman raised his eyebrows. "Packenham, if it's any of your business."

"And that would be what address?"

"A straw. What a drowning man clutches at."

"Level 112, Pleasure House."

"Thank you, my friend," Hertzog said, bowing low, and stepped into an up chute.

He walked out of Packenham's sometime later, wriggling his shoulders in the unfamiliar tailoring, then turned into the tobacconist's next door. Presently he emerged with twelve clear Havanas in a platinum case with a large stone in its lid. He lit one of the cigars and began dropping in on other specialty shops, his face gradually taking on the vaguely narcotized glow of a man spending large amounts of money on himself. He had dinner in the Ocean Grille, and from there he went on a tour of the high-level drink lounges until midnight.

The roof of Pleasure House burned like a torch at night, aflame with gold and scarlet lighting that could have been seen from the European coast like a beacon on the horizon. There were charter amphibians that ran from Sevastopol and Basle, inside the long strip of devastated territory, and brought in the few continentals who could afford it. There were a certain number of less-well-off and determined individuals who took the dizzying, much cheaper ride into the cramped passenger compartments of the dollies in the goods tubes. But by and large the beacon burned unanswered. Pleasure House, and Atlantis, were for the Atlanteans. Not that the average man-in-the-street had ever seen the Top Level Club.

"Wow!" Frank Hertzog exclaimed reverently as he stepped out of the up chute onto purple plush and stood transfixed at the splendor before him.

The lights on the heavily tinted glass roof filtered through into the club as a smoky red-gold haze, caught and highlighted by glittering crystal and polished bronze. Open torches burned without smoke or heat, or much widespread light, in sconces on the draped walls. Liveried servitors moved obsequiously among the tables and couches that took up about a third of the floor space, or slipped discreetly between the drapes of the private rooms along one wall. On a dais to one side, an orchestra thick with violins and saxophones played softly for the couples swirling on the dance floor.

The remaining half of the room was taken up by gaming tables, and most of the crowd was clustered around them, laugh-

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ing and buzzing behind an acoustic wall of directed music that let them cry out with joy or disappointment without disturbing the people at the service tables. The crowd was brilliantly, expensively dressed and ornamented. The music was perfect. The refreshments were exquisite.

"Wow!" Hertzog said again. "What a place for a country boy!" He moved toward a tuxedoed man who could only have been the major-domo, and stopped in front of him with aggressive awkwardness.

"Say," Hertzog said, "I want a little table where I can sort of sit and get my bearings. Something near the dance floor. What time's the show start?" His voice carried some distance, drawing annoyed looks.

"There is no show, sir," the imperturbable man replied gently. "Perhaps you were thinking of the High Roll Club on Level Fifty? Our clientele prefer to use their own resources for entertainment."

"No show, huh? Well, now. I figured a place as classy as this would serve up something special." He put a quick hand. "I know, I know. The High Roll Club on Level Fifty. I've seen it and the babes are for the dogs. S'pose you dredge me up a table anyway, and I'll see what kind of resources I can throw together." He flipped open a new alligator wallet and pulled out a bill. "Here's five hundred for your trouble." He winked aside to a couple at the nearest table, who seemed startled.

The major-domo's eyebrows rose. "Please step right this way, sir," he said, walking briskly toward a centrally located table. Hertzog followed him with a wide grin. "You know," he murmured to himself, "this could get to be a pretty insidious feeling if you let it."

The major-domo showed him to his table, and called over a servitor with an imperative snap of his fingers. People all around Hertzog were staring at him openly, now.

"May I attend to your needs, sir?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah, sure." Hertzog looked amiably up at the hovering servitor. "How's about some champagne?"

"Of course, sir. What vintage, sir?"

Hertzog's brows knitted. "Oh, what the heck!" he said with sudden inspiration. "Just bring me the most expensive stuff you got."

"Very good, sir," the servitor murmured, bowing so low that Hertzog could not have seen any facial expression he chose to wear.

Hertzog's own expression had gone back to its open-faced grin. "And get the band to play some show tunes," he said. "Something out of 'Mermaid's Revel' or 'Fire Fountain.' Here...give 'em this." He peeled a thousand out of his wallet and held it out in two fingers.

"Yes, sir."

The servitor left, and after a moment the orchestra began a muted medley of songs from Arkady Bliss productions. Hertzog beat time contentedly with the base of his glass against the tablecloth, and whistled along with the music.

By the end of an hour, Hertzog was pleasantly conscious of the fact that nearly every eye in the house was following him, no matter what he did. He could also see that some of the people from the other places he'd been earlier had now circulated into the Top Level Club, and there was a gratifying amount of whispering going on.

"Heady, heady, heady," he murmured, strolling to the gaming tables. He flipped a sheaf of bills in front of the cashier. "All blue," he said, and collected a stack of chips. Wandering over to the craps layout, he waited until the dice came to him, bet a handful of chips without bothering to count them, and rolled. Whistling through his teeth, he picked up the dice on the return, winked at the circling crowd, rolled, and made his point. Leaving his winnings, he rolled again, threw a seven, and simulta-

neously said, "Why, hello, Traven," to a man he noticed standing back from the crowd. "Didn't see you standing there."

Traven, who served as clerk of the City Council, nodded back with some constraint. Hertzog winked, rolled, won again, still didn't pick up any of the considerable pile of chips, rolled again, and lost it all. "Your turn, friend," he grinned at the next shooter, and drifted back out of the crowd. The stickman was still raking in chips.

He was dabbling in roulette when he felt Traven's bulk push in beside him. "I'd like to talk to you, Frank," Traven said sternly.

"Sure 'nuff. Nice to see you. Hold on a second though--I wanna see how this play comes out." The ball settled into a slot, and he shrugged. "That sure doesn't look like my number," he said. "Well, easy come, easy go." Walking out of the gaming area, he turned to Traven and said: "Pretty nice place, up here."

Thad Traven was about ten years older than Hertzog, thin, dark, and purse-mouthed. "You won't be able to afford it very often, at this pace."

Hertzog raised his eyebrows. "My money," he said mildly.

"I'm aware of that." Traven was both indignant and embarrassed. "Look, Frank, I know it's none of my business. But I don't like to see it getting to you. You're cutting a swath that's being talked about all over the top ten levels."

"It?"

Traven gestured sharply. "You know what I mean. This is a wide-open city. A man with intelligence and energy can rise up from poverty to fantastic wealth. Your own life stands as a perfect example of that. But too many people don't know how to handle it, once they've got it. It goes away as fast as it came in--faster. Frankly, up to now I'd always thought of you as exceptionally level-headed. This kind of exhibitionism...why," Traven sputtered, "up until tonight, I don't suppose anyone without access to the tax rolls had any idea of how much you're worth. I doubt if many of them knew who you were."

Hertzog spoke softly. "Right. Maybe I got sick of just making it and not getting any pleasure out of it?"

"Do you enjoy this kind of place?"

"I could get to like it," Hertzog said soberly. Then he grinned. "What's the matter, Thad--scared I won't have enough left to contribute to the campaign fund?"

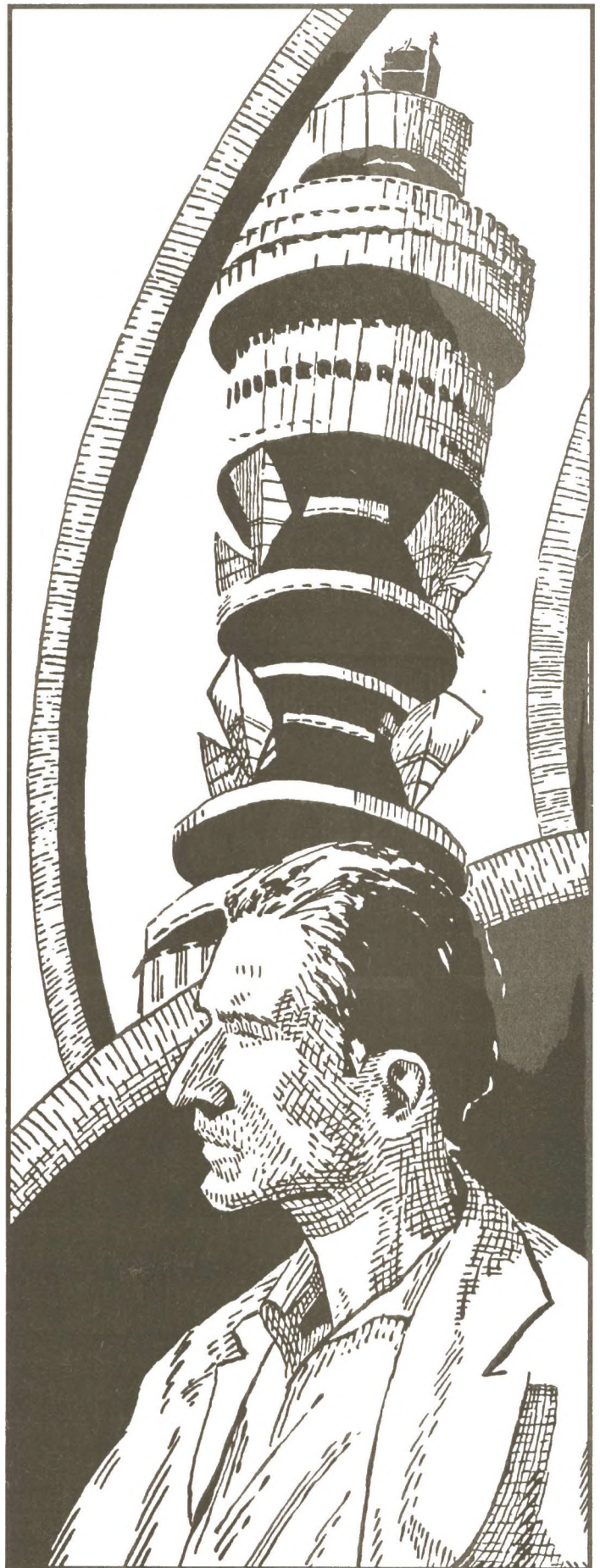
Traven looked at him gravely. "That's not as much of a joke as it might be. You know what people are like--they're happy, they're busy; they don't bother thinking about politics. It's a banner year when two per cent of the electorate registers to vote, and a landslide when one per cent votes. Arousing their interest in the City Council is practically impossible."

"So? So the councilmen have practically lifetime jobs, and as long as they keep the taxes low and stand back out of the way of commerce, everybody's happy. I don't see your beef."

"Just this," Traven said worriedly. "For the first time in years, we're running into an active opposition campaign. You don't see any posters, but that's because nobody would stop to read 'em. It's being done down on the precinct level--the only way it could be done, with this happy-go-lucky populace. Word-of-mouth whispering campaigns; public relations office plants in the papers and magazines; why, they're even buying sneak plugs from the entertainment scripters. I don't suppose you've noticed how much expansionist sentiment there is in the current fiction. Or in the back-fence gossip. It's a fantastic campaign--someone's pouring enormous amounts of money into it."

"Who?" Hertzog seemed to be taking it lightly.

Traven shook his head. "We don't know. It could be anybody. You know as well as I do we haven't got enough police to make a real investigation. We'd have to be able to separate out the entrepreneurs who're smart enough to see that an empire would make them fabulously rich at the start, without being smart



enough to see what a headache it would get to be, or where it would end. Unfortunately, that doesn't show up as a clear mark on a man. This gang could be composed of half the people in this room right now, and we'd never know it. And if they win out, Atlantis'll last perhaps one or two generations before the strain of ruling the world sours us all, sours the world, and gets us stamped flat in a general rebellion." Traven's face was grave. "I've got children. They'll have children. I don't want them getting hit with hydrogen warheads."

"You seriously worried?"

"Damned right I'm worried. We are doing our best, but if this keeps up we might just lose the election. That's why I hate to see you acting like a fool. You're one of the people I thought we could count on."

"Well!" Hertzog was grinning. "Well now, I never would 'a thought it." He clapped Traven heartily on the shoulder. "Cheer up, Thad. I'll be sending a little something your way pretty soon, now."

Traven's mouth shut tight, and his lips disappeared entirely for a moment. "Not if you throw it all away here, first."

"Thad, m'boy, it's an investment," Hertzog said genially. "Just an investment."

Traven stalked away.

Hertzog went back to the gaming tables, stopping a servitor on the way and ordering more champagne.

Several hours later, Hertzog hit a hot streak at the table. By now everyone in the gaming area was clustered around him, and almost as much money was riding his bets as he had put down himself.

Laughing, he tried eight rolls before he made his point, and when it came up at last, he swung his arm out in an all-encompassing sweep and cried out: "Everybody drinks on me. Wups, pardon me, Miss."

He had stumbled lightly against a tall blond girl in a tight-fitting dress. She smiled at him from under lowered eyelashes and murmured, "I'm sure I can't blame you. For being excited, I mean." She stared down at the pile of Hertzog's winnings. "That's an awful lot of money."

Hertzog was grinning down at her bare shoulders, his nose crinkling pleasantly. "Lovely perfume, Miss."

"Why, thank you!"

"My name's Frank Hertzog. Founder and sole President, International Tours, Incorporated."

"Why, my goodness, you took me to Fiji last winter!"

"Did I, now?" Hertzog said with a lively gleam in his eyes.

"Oh, you know what I mean!" the blond girl said with a flustered tap of her fingers against his arm. "I mean, I was a customer of yours!"

"Nearly everybody in Atlantis has been, at one time or another. I'm only sorry now that I haven't been able to give all our clients my personal attention. Will you have a drink with me, Miss?"

"Thank you, I'd love it!" She laughed throatily. "And my name's Paulette Brighton."

"Pleased to meet you, Paulette, I'm sure," Hertzog murmured, signaling to a waiting servitor.

They touched the rims of their glasses and sipped, Hertzog's eyes laughing down at her, and she with her lips pursed enigmatically. Both of them ignored the waiting crowd around the craps table, until they had finished their drinks. Then Hertzog said, "Well, shall we continue where I left off?" He scooped up the dice and shook them vigorously. "Wish me luck?" he smiled at Paulette.

"Oh, sure!" she exclaimed. Then her eyes widened as he continued to shake the dice. "Are you going to get it *all*?"

"Sure." He glanced across the table at the stickman. "House cover it?"

The pale-skinned, lean and self-possessed man nodded. "House covers anything, Mr. Hertzog."

"Good enough." He threw the dice out with a flip of his fingers. There was a gasp from the crowd. Hertzog grinned down at the dice. "Snake eyes. What do you know?"

The stickman hesitated for a fraction of a second, then began pulling in the lost chips. "That was a very fluky roll," he said softly, under the noise of the babbling crowd.

"They're all fluky, friend," Hertzog rejoined. He threw a thousand across the table. "Thanks for a good time, chum. See you again." He turned to Paulette with a smile. "Will you join me at my table?"

She was staring at the raked-in chips unbelievably. She turned to Hertzog. "Don't you care?"

"For Pete's sake, no, of course not!" he laughed. "Come on—I'll buy you another drink." Taking her arm, he steered her toward the tables. "ITI has more money than it knows what to do with."

"And you're ITI," she said. They were among the tables now. "Oh, there's my Uncle Bill!" she exclaimed. "Come on," she said, pulling him in the direction of the broad-jawed blond man with enormous shoulders, who sat quietly at a table and held a brandy glass between his fingertips. "You've got to meet him."

"Looks like," Hertzog murmured agreeably.

The blond man rose easily to his feet as Paulette introduced them. "Frank, this is William Waring. Uncle Bill, I'd like you to meet Frank Hertzog."

The blond man's grip was sure and strong. His smile was smooth. "Delighted to meet you, Mr. Hertzog. I've been watching you at the gaming tables. You seem to be a man after my own heart."

Hertzog grinned foolishly. "Pleased to meet you, Uncle Bill." He dropped quickly into an empty chair. "Hoo!" he said, running a hand over his eyes and chuckling weakly. "'Scuse me, but it's beginning to get me." He brightened. "I know how to fix that! I think we should all have another drink."

"By all means, Mr. Hertzog," Waring said. Paulette sat down next to Hertzog and snuggled her shoulder against his. The waiting servitor came forward with his tray.

William Waring glanced at his wristwatch. "I can hardly believe we have been talking here for over an hour already. You're a fascinating conversationalist, Mr. Hertzog."

Hertzog lolled back in his chair. "Sure. Sure," he mumbled. "Call me Frank, huh?"

"Of course, Frank. Then you're agreed with me that the future of Atlantis depends on expansion to the continental areas?"

Hertzog patted Paulette's hand, where it rested on his forearm. "Bsolutely. The only thing."

"I knew you were an intelligent man the moment I laid eyes on you." Waring smiled heartily. He looked around at the emptying room. "It seems a pity to break up this party so early. Why don't we move on to my diggings?"

Paulette tugged at Hertzog's arm, and put her lips close to his ear. "Why don't we do that, Frank?"

Hertzog gestured extravagantly. "Fine by me."

"Good!" Waring pushed his chair back. "Shall we go, then?"

A quick servitor sprang forward to help Hertzog with his chair. Hertzog grinned at him. "Thanks, ol' buddy." He fished in his wallet and pressed a bill on the man.

Paulette giggled. "It's like water with you, isn't it?"

"What," Hertzog asked, "money? Look Gorgeous, you know what we are, here in Atlantis? We're the happiest, most prosperous, most carefree people that ever walked the Earth. What we have here is happiness. Money won't buy it. It makes money—or whatever else you want. That's the way to live. Happy. You

know how many billions of people have died in this world without ever having that for a solitary second in their lives?" He broke off into a slurred laugh. "Lis'n to me, huh?" He linked arms with Paulette. "C'mon, Sweetheart." Then he stopped and smiled archly. "Wups. 'Scuse me a minute. Phone call." "Have you got a dime?" Paulette giggled.

Waring's apartment was half a floor of a building, with a cantilever balcony that jutted out in a wide sweep over the distant water. Sitting on the living-room lounge, leaning back against the cushions with a glass in one hand and his other arm around Paulette's waist, Hertzog could see the beginnings of sunrise over Europe even while the foaming ocean remained lost in darkness. "Gorgeous place, Bill. Terrific."

"Thank you," Waring said dryly. A great deal of his charm had evaporated once they had come up the chute from the landing stage. "We were speaking about investments."

"Yeah, sure. Go on." Hertzog tugged, peevishly and with half his attention, at Paulette's waist. She did not seem to be as yielding as she had before.

Waring lit a cigarette with precise motions of his well-kept hands. "We were speaking about my investment syndicate."

"Oh, yeah." Hertzog nodded. "Remember now. You wan' me to let you manage my money. You're gonna have pull with the new City Council."

Waring nodded. "Exactly. Once we begin moving into the continental areas, there'll be fortunes waiting to be made. Every dollar of capital will be multiplied dozens of times over. I need every cent I can lay my hands on." He looked sharply at Hertzog. "You'll be given bonds for your investment, of course. Bonds at an extremely attractive rate of interest."

"Sure, sure," Hertzog said. "I figured that."

"You listen to Uncle Bill, Frankie," Paulette whispered, pressing against him once more before she withdrew. "He knows what he's doing. Your money'll be a lot more valuable in his hands than going over a craps table."

"I don't know," Hertzog said slowly. "I don't see why I have to give it to somebody else. Why don't I jus' form a syndicate of my own, now I know the City Council's gonna 'courage 'spanshion?"

Waring glanced at Paulette. He sighed without resignation. "All right, Hertzog, I'll tell you why," he said crisply. He crossed the room and took the drink out of Hertzog's hand. "Sober up and listen!"

"Wh---?"

Paulette slipped out of Hertzog's arm. Waring slapped Hertzog lightly across the face. "Are you listening?"

Hertzog nodded, looking from Paulette to Waring. "Kay. Listening."

"All right." Waring was poised directly in front of Hertzog. "Because I'll break you if you try it. I'll run you and ITI into the ground. No matter how big you are, my syndicate is bigger. You wouldn't have a chance. You'd be a pauper in no time. You wouldn't like that, would you? No more of that money you like to throw away." Waring laughed. "You oaf! A syndicate of your own! But don't try it, Hertzog--I'm warning you. I've broken people before."

"Never get away with it," Hertzog mumbled. "Have you 'rested f'r conspiracy?"

"You won't do that, either," Paulette said coldly. "Tell him, Honey," she said to Waring.

"You see this?" Waring asked Hertzog, taking something out of his breast pocket.

"Piece of straw."

"Exactly. If you try to expose me to anyone, Hertzog, they'll find you floating in the ocean with this in your pocket. Don't

threaten me with letters left in a safe place to be opened after your death. Don't threaten me with anything, Hertzog. I've got most of the police force in my pocket already. And no matter what happens to me, you'll be dead first. Dead, and torn up before you die. Remember that, Hertzog. Life's precious."

"You must have a lot of people scared of that piece of straw, Waring," Hertzog said. Something about the way he said it made Paulette put a delicately groomed hand up to her cheek and stare at him curiously. It made Waring frown and take out a pistol, which Hertzog ignored.

"Poor old Arkady Bliss, for example," Hertzog went on. He had gradually altered his posture on the couch so that he was sitting straight and relaxed. "You broke him down to the point where he tried to defraud ITI for getaway money. Then you had his pockets picked for the cash. You stranded him here, so beat down that he isn't even trying to run any more. It's no fault of his own that he hasn't killed himself. But he never told me a thing, Waring. All because of a piece of straw. A terror-symbol. Plant it on a few corpses, and after that you can use it for an iron control."

Hertzog lounged back and smiled at Waring in a way that was a great deal different from his spendthrift grin.

"Let me tell you about ITI, Waring. I built it out of what I learned from my father's job with a little one-lung agency, and I made it big. Not because I ever thought of using it to control anything, but because I wanted the business. It just grew, and one day I had a monopoly. Well, we give fair service."

"The thing about a big travel agency, chum, is it's got to give complete service. Transportation, accommodations, lodging, food, and financing. There isn't much that goes on in this town that I don't know about. I've got contacts at every hotel and bistro. Got to. I arrange letters of credit. I sell travelers' checks. Got to. I never planned it that way, Uncle Bill, but I know who's going to skip a vacation because he can't afford it, and, vice versa, I know who can afford a bigger one this year."

"Furthermore, chum, when it's money and credit you deal in, you need a staff of special agents to investigate what happens to it when it goes wrong somewhere. I'll bet you cookies to cookie-cutters I've got a police force ten times bigger than what Atlantis has. In fact, the only thing I didn't know about all of this hanky-panky was who you were."

"Paulette!" Waring rapped out, "Signal Fletcher--quickly!"

"Too late, Buster," Hertzog said. "Sad to say, you're up it. Any bully-boys you've got scattering through this building are too busy to answer signals." He threw one of the heavy bolsters into Paulette's midriff, and twisted up out of the lounge. Then he punched Waring cleanly on the jaw, scooping up his gun.

"And that, Uncle Bill," he said as he heard a special agent finally break through the lock in the elevator door, "was not for slapping me. I needed it. I'm drunk as a skunk. I hit you for the hangover I'm going to have."

Frank Hertzog stood at his office window, his hands in his pockets, and rocked forward on his toes. He looked out over the sea and the city, and after a while he chuckled. "I guess it'll hold itself up for a while longer," he said, and turned back toward his desk, where Hoke Bannister was sitting on one edge and lighting a clear Havana cigar from a platinum case.

"Darned right I'm going to sue Waring for conspiracy to defraud. Twenty thousand dollars in damages, and a hundred thousand recovery costs." He stalked back toward the desk. "Imagine the nerve of the guy," he said indignantly, picking up the phone. "Get me the Legal Department. Trying to mess around like that in my home town."

PW

Magic can be found in the most unlikely places.

GROWING HEARTS

BY DENISE LOPES HEALD

Illustrated by David Grilla

"Seeds of love. They grow where they will-- in gravel, deep soil, in desert, on rock or from rotten snags. I've seen them die in the prettiest gardens and refuse to grow for the likeliest looking people. But this one--" He opened his scarred hands, revealing a tiny paper cup filled with loam. "This one's for you, darling. I know it will live for you. You've got the magic in your eyes. Don't let anyone make you doubt it."

Young hands closed round the cup, the treasure perfectly fitted to her grasp, and four-year-old eyes looked up with the wisdom of centuries. She smiled, the rest of her expression solemn.

"Thank the man, Carrie." Her mother's hand chucked the back of her head, bobbing the child's chin.

"Thank you." The tiny voice chimed high and sincere.

"You're most welcome, darling."

The mother stirred, edging nearer, her stance flirtatious. Her scent of sweat, cigarette smoke, and baby powder clogged his sinuses.

"Got anything for *me*?" Her eyes lit with childish greed and womanly carnality.



"No, Mam. I wish I did."

A semi blasted past on the narrow road, rocking Rayne and kicking dust and weed litter in his face. Eyes shielded by one hand, he heard the impact without seeing it.

Thud. The blow sounded even above the truck's roar--so familiarly loud. *No.*

Heart pounding, he looked up, saw the semi's rear doors barreling into coastal sunset. A big black and tan dog lay crumpled on the road shoulder. Bright blood stained the yellowed grass.

He didn't want to see it, didn't want to keep walking until he stared down at the poor creature.

Eyes closed, its tongue lolled, spine likely broken. But with a nudge of one boot, it spun around, sinking canines into leather. A younger dog would have hurt him. But patches of scaly skin showed through the black and tan's faded fur, and her teeth sported wide gaps.

"Easy." He squatted, making no attempt to pet her.

Sucking ragged breaths, she came far enough out of shock to whimper, collapse flat again and even wag her tail, equating human presence with hope. He hadn't any to give.

Instead he dug in his pack, found the oversized aid kit, and removed a roll of gauze. His fingers, long and straight, looked almost black against the white bandage. Tying her mouth shut made examining her safer, not easier.

Her left hind leg was broken and torn, less damage than he'd expected. The semi had just grazed her, but she'd probably suffered internal injuries, too.

A barbed wire fence divided the road from the dry hills beyond. Here and there, flat boards had been inserted to tighten the fence's strands. Wriggling two broken slats from wire claws, he splinted the dog's leg.

Crazy. Helping this failing creature proved his insanity.

But he'd been crazy for some time now.

Teeth gritted, he dripped water from his canteen through the gauze into the dog's mouth. Her tongue worked, drinking, he hoped.

Dusk blurred surrounding hills and softened the outlines of oaks and scrub. Mounded foliage darkened against pale grass. A salty breeze chilled his sweaty back and cleared his sinuses of the dog's stench. They'd freeze on the road overnight, but moving the bitch would probably kill her outright. He stood and walked, hunting something to carry her on.

A nice plank would work. Instead, he found a flattened cardboard box. Folding it in half, forming four layers out of two, made it reasonably stiff. He removed the gauze and she tried to bite him again as he shifted her onto it.

"Easy, girl. Easy."

His voice rang hollow and old in the dusk, his bedside manner unpracticed. Sweating, head arched away from the dog's stinking breath, he wormed her through the fence wires, ducked through himself, then found a grassy hollow where they could settle out of sight of the road, lost in the night and the land.

Checking her before he slept, he discovered her dulled eyes wide open. He soothed the fur over her forehead. Her tongue flicked against his wrist, and she wagged her tail as if to reassure him.

A *thud* nightmare woke him to diamond dotted sky. The bitch lay cold and stiff.

He'd known--old as she was, she'd needed to die. Six years as a paramedic, and the ones you held onto always slipped away.

Thud. He wrestled the woman on the side of the highway, trying to hold her down while his partner called for help, while the engine company advised they were nearly on the scene, and drugs coursed through her veins, granting her superhuman strength, breaking his hold--



Thud.

He stood, gathered his pack, left his sweatshirt with the dead dog and staggered into the chill of the night.

Thud.

He followed the black ribbon of the road in the dark of the night. Above, stars glittered and danced, and he stared at them until he choked, chest heaving. Sobs brought tears. His pulse deafened him with thunder.

Light speared the dark. He turned.

Thud.

He woke on his feet, bathed in dripping, ocean-scented fog. Flinching, he struggled to open stiffened eyelids. One refused to budge. The other revealed a blur of scraggly branches poking through the mist, disembodied claws.

Time passed in silver haze and periods of blankness. He fell. Grass prickled his torn cheek.

Fog dripped. He rested.

A gleam of sunlight brightened the mists before his staring eye. One hand he dared not move, dared not look at. The other he raised laboriously to wipe grit from his eye.

A long moment passed. Shadows assumed definition. A raven croaked. Mist eddied and rose. He lay in a hollow, the fog a muffling tent above. Chill numbed his pain and stole his strength.

He blinked. The mists thinned. Something nuzzled his cheek.

Thud. Thud-thud.

Warmth scraped his face. A black snout reared above his eye. He screamed, writhed back. The dog--the poor mangled bitch.

Tears overwhelmed him. Pain drove up his spine and exploded in his skull. He wailed, shrieked grief and terror, scrambled to turn over.

Wet grass slid beneath both his fingers and *not* fingers. Weakness tumbled him. The dog rose, breath stinking--always stinking--her pelt ripe with the scent of loam, salt rime, and laurel.

Thud. A heart beat--not his, *hers*.

Thud-thud-thud. Terror, so familiar, so black and infallible, except--

--her eyes opened, brown and deep as the earth itself.

Thud-thud.

Warmth bled from those eyes, seeped over him lighter and finer than the mist, easing the cords in his neck, sapping the tension from knotted muscle.

She whimpered and twisted against her deformed hip. Froth dripped from her muzzle. Alive.

Swallowing weakness, he reached for her, wriggled nearer, thinking he should keep her warm, thinking more distantly that he should keep himself warm. But she receded. His outstretched fingers couldn't quite touch her muzzle and drew no closer.

"Here, baby. Here--"

Mist swirled, blurring her to grey. Her shadow form distorted. He froze. Wisps and tendrils darkened, writhed, drew her fur into a thousand coiling points. Her legs stiffened. Her head arched back. Her body corkscrewed, standing straight up, feet burrowing into the ground.

His teeth chattered against gaps and bloody pulp. Pain fired his jaw. His stomach rose and strangled him.

Dead--both of them.

Bone burst from fur. The twisting mass of her body rose on white stalk legs. Stench rode the mist, thick and suffocating.

He stared up into round brown eyes abrim with peace.

His breath escaped. Warmth took him again. His trembling stopped. His head slid against grass, and he watched her bones drive deep and deeper, darkening as they grew, twining like great knobby vines. Into their mass, her skull sank and disappeared. About the knots of her eyes, strange, broad leaves swayed in

fading mists. Stench faded.

He drew a breath. Warmth soothed his throat and eased his stomach. Tears trickled from his cheeks and soaked the ground. Rootlets dabbled and fed. Great flowers budded. Blossoms spread wide to the rising sun. Perfume lapped him in sweet gentle waves.

What a fool--trying to help *her*. He'd only delayed her moment. She'd grown beyond his denial. They all had.

Seeds burst free and rained on his head.

"Easy, Son."

Rayne sat straight up against restraining hands. Sunlight blinded him.

"Easy, now. Looks as if you took a bump or two."

He blinked and focused. The man's strong hands steadied him. Sitting in matted grass beside the road, his pack pressed his side. Dried blood stained its front. His shirt hung tattered and shredded. The knees of his jeans gaped, caked with blood and dirt.

"A--" He blinked past the man's worried face to a dusty pickup. "A c-c-car h-hit me."

"I was afraid of that. You sit still. I'll bring help."

"N-no." Rayne flexed his hands, staring down at whole fingers, bruises and scars he'd never worn before. "I'll be fine. Fell asleep is all. Give me a ride?"

The man's bottom lip slipped in and out between yellowed teeth. "You a botanist or somethin'?" A hard-worn baseball cap nodded toward his pack. Tendrils of green straggled from its flopping flap.

"Just an amateur."

The child crowded past her mother and reached up to him, eyes sparkling. Their fingertips met. She sighed and laughed, a joyful peel so loud that the mother started, and for once looked down at her daughter with true and total awareness.

He slipped away, leaving them to their moment, to whatever transformation they could manage. He couldn't save them, only himself.

PW



Still Out On The Cutting Edge

An Interview with Mystery Man:

Lawrence Block

As a writer, it is difficult enough to establish a single successful series. Lawrence Block has produced several over the course of his career, including two which remain active: the hardboiled adventures of hard-edged Matt Scudder and the comical escapades of Bernie Rhodenbarr, the ever-loveable Burglar Who. It seems like quite a juggling act to keep two series running concurrently, but then Lawrence Block has always been an exceptional showman.

Since his auspicious debut as a writer of pornographic novels in the 1950's, Block has had his hand in as many genres as he could find. But his love for mystery has remained powerful, and it is there he has achieved his greatest success. His recent novels include *The Burglar Who Traded Ted Williams* and *A Long Line of Dead Men*, as well as the short story collection *Some Days You Get the Bear*. Upcoming books include a reprint of *Deadly Honeymoon*, plus a new book in June, *The Burglar Who Thought He Was Bogart*.

PW: *At the center of A Long Line of Dead Men is a group of people who meet once every year, always reading the names of the dead members--until there's only one man left, and he recruits a new group. Where did the concept for such a club come from?*

Block: I read something about the basic premise of the book but I haven't a clue about where or when. It was certainly at least—I would say at least 25 years

ago that I read something about that somewhere, I don't know where. I know it was some article, it wasn't someone else's fiction. And I simply remembered the basic premise and tried when I decided to write *A Long Line of Dead Men*. I tried a little to research it and see if I could find anything about such folks—I couldn't. But I didn't try terribly hard.

PW: *When did you know that this sort of offbeat club would be the focus of a novel?*

Block: I had it in mind for awhile but never really thought about using it. It stayed in my mind. Then about a year or so before I started work on *A Long Line of Dead Men*. I thought of using it in a book. My first thought was to use it in a non-Scudder book, a large multiple viewpoint novel. The more I thought about it, the more it seemed to resonate thematically with Scudder, and I realized that was the way I wanted to write it.

PW: *When I finished reading that novel, I had the same sense that I did at the end of Eight Million Ways to Die, where Scudder realizes he's an alcoholic. The parallel is that Scudder has undergone a metamorphosis. Did you have that feeling?*

Block: In a sense, yeah. The book is very much about aging, about mortality, those are some of its themes—if it has themes. I think I felt some of what you mention though I don't know if I'd have been able to put words to the tune as it were. In each book there's an evolution of the character certainly. It's sometimes obvious, sometimes less perceptible. But I think that always happens—it's that kind of an organic series.

PW: *Were there any cold feet about letting Scudder go down the aisle with his reformed prostitute girlfriend, Elaine?*

Block: Not that I know of, it seemed like,

well, what was happening then. One time a few years ago Bob Parker and I were both interviewed on a TV program and [the host] asked Parker first, "Will Spenser and Susan ever get married?" Parker said no and explained how there has to be an uncertain ... whatever he said, I don't remember exactly. The upshot was no. "They would forever well be in love and she be fair." He was quite on the Grecian urn with it. And [the host] asked me and I said, "I don't know. Well, they could get married. The only thing you can be sure of is that they won't live happily ever after. It won't suddenly go into a flatline once they're married. There'll still be something going on."

PW: *Although you published a lot of books under pseudonyms, your first novel under your own name was Mona. How old were you when you wrote it?*

Block: *Mona* was written in 1960, it was published in early '61 as I recall. But it was written in 1960, so I was 22.

PW: *Who were your influences at the time?*

Block: I don't know. I read voluminously for a period of years. I don't know much about influences, I don't know how relative they are to a writer. Musicians talk more in terms of influences, jazz musicians, they try and play like one another. I don't think writers do that in the same way. You try and find your own voice more than anything else. So I don't really know.

PW: *Have you ever considered polishing your early novels before reissuing them?*

Block: Oh no, I certainly wouldn't do that. And I'm puzzled by writers who try and fix early things because, you know, they're all of a piece. How are you going to edit out the kid that you were, which is really what is going to bother you when you read it.

If I found anything I objected to, I might be tempted to change it and I really

don't believe in that. I saw an anthology one time where the editor had decided to update some of the early stories, change the phone calls from a nickel to a dime, and other things like that, change various references to hide the fact that they were written when they were. But you can't hide that. They're written a certain way because they were creatures of their time.

There are probably howlers in some of the books that I might be well-advised to remove, but the hell with it. I'd rather just leave it there. If I gave the whole thing a lot of thought, I'd probably decide not to reprint them at all and I don't want to do that.

PW: *Although you've written some very dark books, you have a flair for comedy as well. Do you feel that comic writing is one of your gifts?*

Block: I guess so. What I find occasionally puzzling is that people find it surprising that I write both light and dark, as if that's so unusual. And I guess it may be, though I know several writers who do. But it seems to me more remarkable when a person only writes either light or dark books in that most people have more than one side to themselves, more than one mood. It surprises me that most people are able only to come from one perspective in their work.

PW: *After Bernie's long hiatus, what was the response to The Burglar Who Traded Ted Williams when it came out last year?*

Block: It was terrific. We got incredible press coverage. Lots of reviews, all of them extremely generous. The book sold well. It's gone into several additional printings. They got a lot of copies out there and it was well-received. That was part of what moved Dutton to decide to do all the early books in hardcover.

PW: *What can you tell us about the upcoming The Burglar Who Thought He Was Bogart?*

Block: Well, because of an emerging relationship through the course of this book, Bernie goes every night to a theater on the upper west side to a Bogart film festival and sees a double feature of early films. That begins to bleed into his consciousness and so the case itself--and some of the people involved--will simultaneously remind one of The Maltese Falcon and Casablanca in certain respects. It was certainly great fun to do.

PW: *Speaking of movies, has Hollywood shown any interest in your work lately?*

Block: A pilot that I did for a projected

series for A&E--I heard nothing for the longest time and I thought that was probably dead in the water. Then they asked if I could expand it to two hours from one hour. I just finished doing a rewrite on that. It's their intention to shoot it and air it in the fall on a noir anthology series called Hardboiled. It will indeed become a backdoor pilot, which means if it flies and everybody likes it, it'll be a series. But I wouldn't count on that part. But it's beginning to seem that it's actually possible that it will get shot and get on--but one never knows.

My favorite line about Hollywood, one of them, is "You can die of encouragement in this town." When they say they love something, that means one of several things: they love it, they hate it, they haven't read it. And it's equally likely to be any of those. It isn't that they lie all the time, it's that there's absolutely no way of knowing when they're sincere and when they're not. So who knows?

PW: *Any other deals pending?*

Block: The other TV thing I may be working on this summer is a pilot for one of the networks based on the Chip Harrison books. Though we will see. I don't know if I'll wind up doing it or not. I may step off the boat somewhere between here and there. Another fellow and I will be working on it together and I may decide that I don't want to do it or I just don't have time for it, in which case he'll do it.

PW: *Now what exactly are the Chip Harrison books about?*

Block: A young kid coming of age, humorous--or at least I hope so. And after two of those, I still liked the voice but there was no way to have him come of age forever. The third and fourth books consisted of Chip working for a private detective, it was sort of Nero Wolfe pastiche. If it gets on, by the time it gets on, I assume it would be unrecognizable.

PW: *One of your recurring characters who appears twice in Some Days You Get the Bear is the lawyer Ehrengraf, who always manages to get his clients out of scrapes--with evidence that mysteriously appears at the crucial moment. I understand there's been a small press book of Ehrengraf stories. Are these all reprints from your story collections?*

Block: Well, they haven't all been collected. There have been six collected out

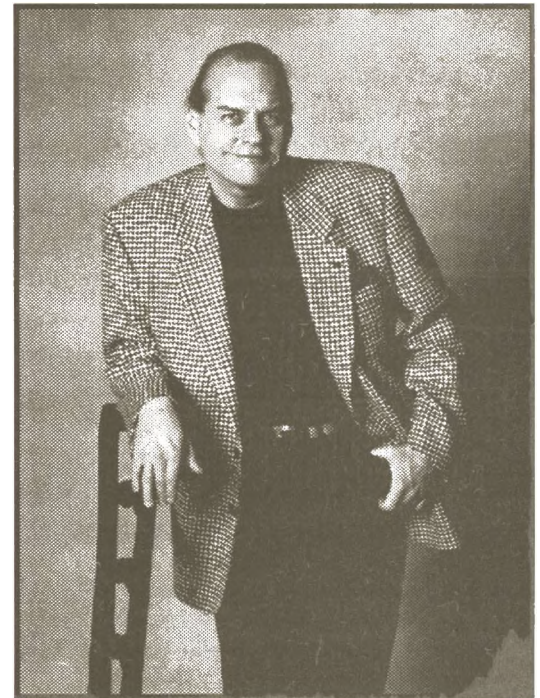


Photo by Athena Gassouris

of a total of eight. So there are two in that small press book that did not appear. I was glad to get that out because there was no way that the Ehrengraf stories...I was just not going to write enough to make up a regular trade book on the subject. So I was pleased to have that.

A problem with Ehrengraf is that there are only so many variations that you can work on that notion before the stories just repeat themselves with different characters, and I didn't want to do that. I think I've worked as many variations as I feel capable of. That's why there hasn't been any story since the eighth one, even though the incentive of having a book of them has been present since the beginning. You couldn't have a novel about Ehrengraf. It's much too fragile a premise for that.

PW: *Some of the best stories in Some Days You Get the Bear aren't even crime stories. One of these is "Cleveland in My Dreams," which starts with a man who has an eerily recurring dream about driving to Cleveland. How did that develop?*

Block: The basic thing of it was essentially a joke that an uncle of mine told me years ago. And I never heard it anywhere else, so it was clear to me that it hadn't had enormous circulation. I told it a couple times--it's a hard one to tell--and never to anyone who'd heard it before. I could only conclude that it had had a limited currency. I saw that it could just as easily be a story. There were other elements that came in--that was the genesis of that. I've done that frequently at readings, that story. It plays well.

PW: *Another wonderful tale of yours with*

no trace of mystery elements is the title story, "Some Days You Get the Bear." Do you ever have trouble selling work that's outside the genre?

Block: Not particularly. "Some Days You Get the Bear," that was funny. The second place that was submitted to was Penthouse. They bought it, they never ran it. It's credited in the book as having appeared in Penthouse because who knew, they might have actually printed it by the time we came out and they paid a good price for it. They just never ran it.

"Cleveland in My Dreams" ran in Ellery Queen. By no stretch is there any crime element in it. "Hilliard's Ceremony," the African story, is not a crime story. Armchair Detective looked at it and liked it. Kate Stine said she was really trying to rationalize purchasing the story and could they be spies. And I thought about it, and I said, "That actually sort of fits." Maybe they were spies all along and I didn't know.

PW: *Do you feel a greater sense of security now than in the early days of your career?*

Block: Certainly, I've earned more in recent years so there's a certain financial security that God knows has never been present until very, very recently.

PW: *What about publishing security? In the 1960's, were you ever concerned that the next book might be your last--that you wouldn't be able to sell another?*

Block: No, I didn't have that concern. I always felt somewhat confident about being able to do this. No, I think it was easier then to be confident that I would have another book to write than it is now. I don't agonize a great deal over it, but I have two series that I'm currently writing and I can't imagine that either of them is apt to be eternal. There's a finite number of books on either character that I'm gonna be able to do.

As you know, there have been several times when I thought I was done writing about Scudder. Eventually, that'll probably be true. After five books about Bernie Rhodenbarr, there was a great drought before the sixth. There's a seventh written and there will be no more coming, but I don't know for how long. There's no way to know.

You don't want to get into producing something only because there's a demand for it. That's a great way to do it for your work and burn yourself out. Yet it's a great temptation. Publishers always want a writer to keep on doing the same thing. They know they can sell it and they know how they can sell it. They're not stupid or philistine about this necessarily, it's just

much easier to treat an author as a brand name and have him produce the same book annually. That works best for everybody. It doesn't necessarily work best for the writer in the long run.

PW: *As your popularity has increased, do you feel more pressure to stay within the bounds you've established for yourself?*

Block: No one's ever really told me much what to write and I don't have that now. But it's very clear that that's what people want. With two series running, each publisher would be delighted to get a book a year--not only am I not much inclined to do two books a year, but even doing one a year and alternating them, there's not a great deal of time for trying other things. So that no one has to say don't try something new. There's no time left, you're not going to.

PW: *You are still interested in working outside of those series, then?*

Block: I don't have anything yet that I'm ready to write specifically, but I know I want to something outside the series, pretty soon I think. I've been either blessed or cursed with a low boredom threshold. I don't really want to do the same thing over and over. So I'd like to try something somewhat different. Eventually one of the characters I won't be able to write about. Maybe not forever but for awhile. I'm sure that'll happen.

PW: *As a person and as a writer, do you think there will ever be a time when you simply walk away from writing?*

Block: No. There may come such a time, but I don't think it'll last. There may very well come a time when I want a year off, or even longer than that. Or a couple years of just doing short stuff. But I would think as long as my mind holds out, I'll want to write.

A good friend of mine has stopped writing after years of doing nothing else. He spent years as a screenwriter and then wrote four or five novels in succession that no one wanted to publish. I think that could take some of the joy out of it for him. I think he's done writing. Now I can't imagine that for myself. (Pause) There have been days when I might have answered that question differently.

PW: *At this stage of your career, how would you compare writing now as to how it was for you thirty years ago?*

Block: The books don't get any easier. They don't get any easier, and they may well get a little harder. Also--and this may

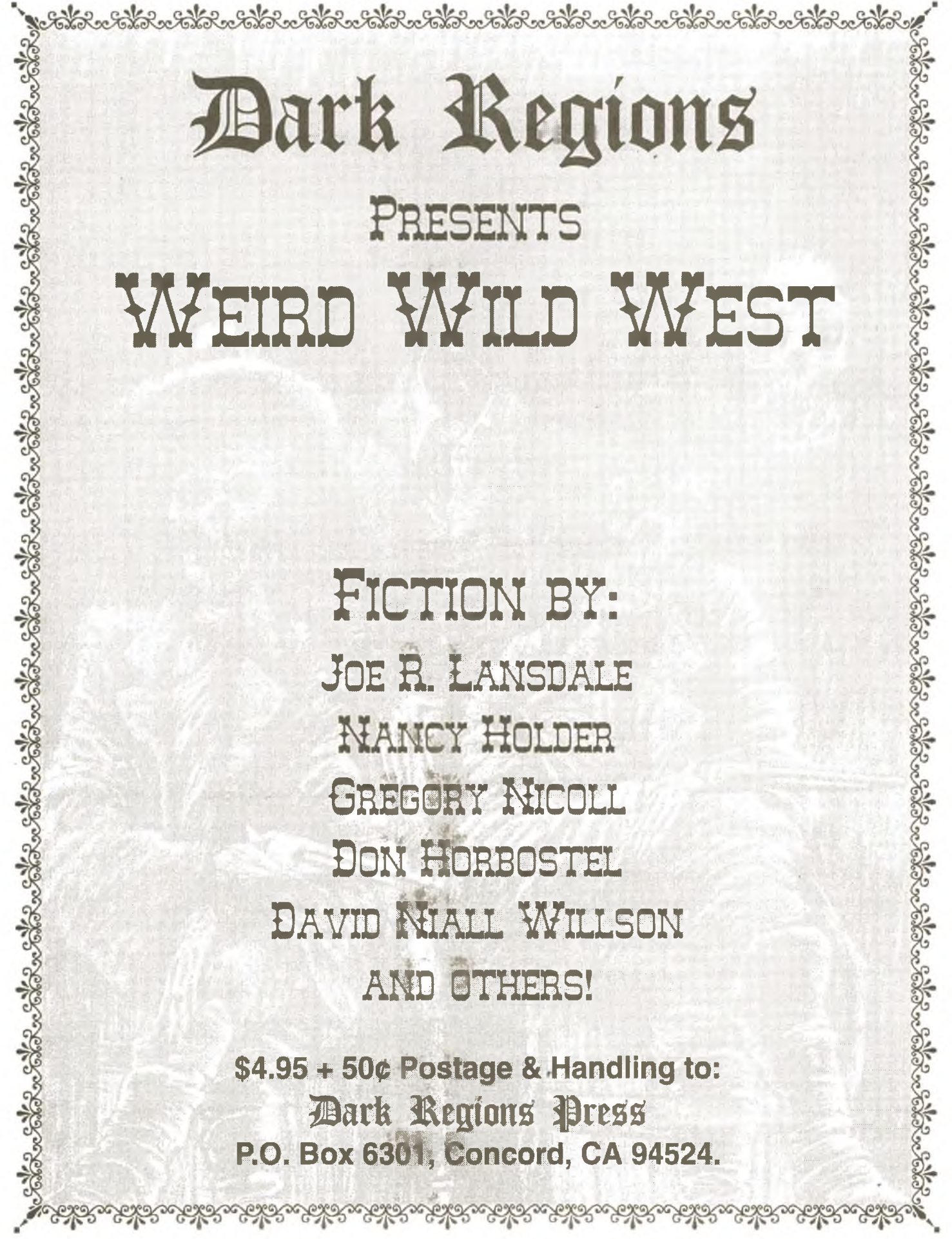
be illusion--but it certainly feels one's under more pressure. Aside from that, I don't know what differences there are. I can more easily insist on doing things the way I want to than I could have thirty years ago certainly--which brings dangers of its own. Thirty years ago the danger was that I would too easily--and when it was not really the right move--I would make changes to make an editor happy. Now it's easy for me to insist on doing it my way and I might be wrong.

One of the biggest changes that just fairly recently became clear to me, one of the biggest ways that *life* has changed is the amount of non-writing career related things that I have to do. Certainly, the first 15 or 20 years I was doing this, maybe longer, the only career related thing that I did was sit down and write. That was all. Not just that I didn't tour then, and that takes up blocks of time certainly. Interviews take up time. And correspondence takes up time like it never used to. And invitations to speak...lots of things that I welcome, but they do take up time and they don't have very much to do with sitting down and writing stories.

PW: *Do you think there's a danger of that becoming a distraction for some writers?*

Block: Well, there's probably a danger of it becoming a distraction for me. And I suspect I probably am and will continue to be willing for it to. I don't want to write two books a year. And sometimes I'm willing to find other things to do that are career-related so that it doesn't feel like a hobby. If I go fly out to Columbus and speak at a book and author dinner, or if I go and tour and do a bunch of signings and all that, it doesn't feel like it's something I'm doing because I have time on my hands. It's very much a part of the career, and working towards whatever career goals are involved.

In contrast, back in 1970 I think it was, I was living out in the country back in the western part of New Jersey and writing, of course. But I opened an art gallery so that I'd have something to do. I opened an art gallery in rural Pennsylvania, I only had it for a year. And it was so that I would have something to do and so that I would see people because writing only took a certain amount of time and I was going nuts. I don't have any urges to open an art gallery these days.



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E. Jay O'Connell's fiction has appeared in *Aboriginal Science Fiction*, *Galaxy*, *Mindsparks*, and many others. "The Option" is the first of two stories we have in inventory by this talented new writer. The second, "A Burning Green," will appear later this year.

THE OPTION

THE CONSOLE'S BEEP DRAGGED ME FROM A BAD dream. One of those where your spine throbs warmly, full of dope, your skull stuffed with dirty cotton wads, and you can't run without stumbling. But you want to run, need to run. Badly.

I went to the bathroom and padded to the monitor, still in my pajamas. We were interviewing a batch of prisoners on death row. I punched in and gulped down last night's coffee, gray with skim milk. Jan wouldn't buy us cream anymore. We were both getting a little pudgy. So I stole those little plastic shots of half-and-half at restaurants. Yesterday, she'd found my cache' in the butter-hider and thrown them out.

Mikal flashed into a window on-screen and peered at the camera, rubbing red-rimmed eyes. FMAD software--Facial Mapping and Decoding--locked onto his features as I started the word-association test.

BY E. JAY O'CONNEL

Illustrated by Bob E. Hobbs

*A deadly experiment has gone astray.
Will it be the end of mankind?*

"Mother." I said.

Matted blonde hair hung down over his eyes. I nudged him. "Anything that pops into your head."

"Jesus," he grimaced. "I've done this test before."

He smoothed the tangled curls back from his forehead, glaring at the camera. I called up his records in another window. He had taken the thing already, several times.

"So you have." The test was Agency bullshit. "I'll just dupe your earlier results." I copied them through a BlackNet

filter that introduced a reasonable degree of experimental error.

He nodded. Though his face was a little crude, his eyes were very blue and clear. "So. Am I in?" He was trying to sound casual. I checked his convictions. He'd shot a gas station attendant in Georgia and raped the teenaged cashier. They weren't sure *what* exactly he'd raped her with, but she'd died a week later. God, I hated this crap.

I coughed. "I don't know." His face hardened like cement. "But just between you and me, I think they'll take you." I never told them I was the one making the decision.



He sighed, tension melting from his wiry frame as he leaned back in the chair. "Good."

"Mikal, why do you want the option?" This question wasn't on the form. In twenty-four hours Mikal would either be dead by injection or sweating out the fever in the Panopticon.

He looked at the camera. "Because I'm innocent."

I nodded, although of course, he couldn't see me: the camera was one-way. A few of them insist on their innocence right to the end—but never afterwards.

I never let myself believe it might be true. I opted Mikal. You want to blame somebody, blame me.

But you'll have to get in line.

Weeks later, the chirp of the phone woke me from a fitful sleep. The room light, motion triggered, flickered on as I sat up gasping in the darkness. I peered at my watch. It was either very late, or very early, depending on how you looked at such things.

I made myself answer the phone. I've always despised late-night calls. The news is never good. Our monster was on the line.

I slapped myself twice, trying to jump start my brain, my prepared speech forgotten. The Agency's script lay on the end table.

"You know they've tapped my phone?" I said.

Mikal just giggled. "Do you honestly think that matters?"

"No. They can't catch you. I realize that. I just wanted you to know." The Agency wasn't going to be happy about this. Not that I gave a damn about what they wanted anymore. "I won't lie to you, Mikal."

The giggle again. His accelerated metabolism made it sound a little like the Joker on the old Batman show. "An honest monkey!"

"Please stop, Mikal."

"You're my kind of monkey, Doctor. We'll see if you become my kind of man."

Then the phone was buzzing in my hand like a hollow reed. The Agency would have their goons by to threaten me within the hour. I made myself a cup of coffee and answered my e-mail waiting for the knock on the door. I filled the cup halfway with cream. Since Jan left, I'd been indulging myself. Somehow, the stuff didn't taste as good as I remembered, leaving an evil, greasy slick down the back of my throat.

Mikal knew my name, my phone number. He knew where I lived. I watched the surface of my coffee ripple for several seconds before realizing it was my trembling hand.

I'd been with the Project from the beginning, working as a lab technician for Dr. Eich before getting my doctorate. We thought we were working a treatment for Parkinson's disease. The animal model was a huge success. Rhesus monkeys with induced Parkinson's regained motor function and bounced around their cages happily. Ten percent died during the fever associated with the treatment, but that wasn't too bad. Eich figured it was some sort of auto-immune response we'd eventually get a handle on.

The first human trial wasn't that great. Giles Peters was our sole survivor, a retired civil servant with advanced symptoms, uncontrollable muscle tremors, confusion, the works.

"I'm not thinking right," he said, after coming out of the fever. The treatment boosted production of a whole host of neurotransmitters. It also caused synaptic regeneration, making nerve cells grow new processes, hardwiring new connections in the brain. The moneys hadn't complained about it, of course.

"How is your thinking disturbed?"

"Oh," he cackled. "My thinkin' ain't disturbed. It's *better*. Much better." His eyes grew moist, staring into the middle distance. "How could I have been so god-damned stupid my whole life." He chuckled. "So stupid."

He started reading the Wall Street Journal and investing his small savings. Within six weeks, recovery was complete, no tremors, no memory loss, a miracle. He checked out of the hospital a couple of days later. He shook my hand.

"So long, Doc." He winked. "I owe it all to you. But don't expect money."

"No, we owe *you*. Without test subjects, there would be no new medicines." So what if the FDA never approved the treatment? We'd helped an old man get better. The ones who died hadn't had much of a life to look forward to, anyway.

I've always been quick with rationalizations.

Six months later, I watched the police empty his walk-in freezer on national television. He had the bodies of thirty little boys in plastic dry-cleaning bags. He'd eaten only their livers and genitals, and saved the rest. They'd caught him by accident, when a gas company technician searching for a leak had let himself into the basement.

In the time it had taken Giles Peters to kill those kids, he'd built his pension from the post office into three million dollars. I autopsied his brain after the execution, slicing it into a half-million translucent wafers.

Eich/Lipman caused massive regeneration of cerebral tissue in humans, much more so than in the primate model. The autopsy showed some other interesting side effects. Peters had regrown his tonsils and appendix. The buds of a third set of molars gleamed from his dental x-rays. His necrotic hip had begun to recalcify, in some sort of reverse osteoporosis.

I remember storming into Eich's office with the results. "This isn't a cure for Parkinson's," I told him. "It's a cure for *everything*."

Eich nodded, placid as always. "Yes," he said, looking up from his monitor. "Except, it would seem, misanthropy."

The Agency goons didn't stay long. Their veiled threats and armpit holsters stopped having any effect weeks ago. What was the worst they could do? Kill me? They weren't gone ten minutes when the phone rang again.

"Hello, Mikal."

"Hello, Doctor. I've learned a little more about phones. They won't know I've called. We can talk as long as you like."

I tried to stop my hands from shaking. If the Agency didn't scare me anymore, the prospect of a slug in my brain didn't scare me, why did Mikal?

"Have you turned on the TV lately, Doctor?" Mikal asked.

"No."

"Why don't you?"

I listened to the dead air a second or two before walking over and flicking on the set. I'd cut myself off three days ago. I flicked to CNN, settling myself in the natty vinyl lounge chair that Jan had constantly threatened to throw away. I didn't have to worry about that anymore. I wondered if Jan was still alive—she'd moved to San Francisco.

The plague was spreading. TV was awful—group shots of tightly packed humanity, like hordes of locusts. Close-ups of childrens' faces, sobbing. Lingering shots of bulldozers pushing rag doll bodies into limed trenches. Funeral pyres the size of rock concerts. Deathporn.

The next time he called, he asked if I had any regrets.

A memory surfaced, so bright and clear I had to tell him. "When I was a lab assistant, right out of grad school, I had a job in cancer research. We were looking for a way to get a new oil soluble drug into our monkeys. I thought of DMSO."

"Yes. Go on. Anything that comes into your head."

"A former student had done tests, for toxicity levels of DMSO. I copied the numbers out of this crappy old notebook. Some stupid grad student who'd slipped a decimal place."

I cleared my throat, which hurt like hell for some reason. "I

injected over a dozen rhesus monkeys. When I came in the next morning, they were sleeping.

"I thought. They were dead. All of them. Those monkeys didn't die to cure cancer. They died because I made a mistake. That's always bugged me."

Mikal made a sound I couldn't interpret, either laughter or crying. When he wouldn't stop, I tore the phone off the wall and dropped it off the back porch.

The phone fell the three stories and shattered impressively on the blacktop in a spray of plastic and circuitry. The cable box followed soon after--I didn't think I could move the TV, it was one of those 27-inch jobs the man from the store had set up.

The cable box bounced. Rental equipment tends to the sturdy side. I felt better afterwards. If Mikal wanted to talk to me he could visit. Of course, the Agency men stationed around the building might prove a problem.

Or they might not.

I was one of a dozen operators monitoring over forty Opted prisoners. The Agency watched the operators. Every body watched everybody, and Eich was still in charge--sort of. Instead of making the hand-off to other scientists in the private sector as was common in drug development, he'd stayed with the project. And I stayed with him.

I noticed some data in Mikal's file that had puzzled me. He had an anomalous IQ test, pre-kindergarten, administered as part of the Head Start program. He had tested extremely high but a decade later his SAT's and college boards were below average.

But after we'd infected him with Eich/Lipman, something about his case kept preying on my mind.

I pored over his records, mostly multiple-choice tests that didn't tell me much. He had gone to a lousy public school. Finally, I got to the end of his files, staring at his signature on the final release form. The printed letters were crude. Childlike. I scanned the document on screen; the actual piece of paper was somewhere in Washington D.C. now, or in Iron Mountain, I couldn't recall.

The K in his name was backwards.

I reprocessed his data, and it all made sense. He was dyslexic. Learning disabled. His 'normal' intelligence was a facade. I had no idea what his starting capacity was--and we'd had a hard enough time keeping up with the Opted normals.

I hoped the fever would kill him.

The Panopticon was an old idea in penology. Part of the punishment was a complete lack of privacy; everyone's cell opened visually into the center of the well. Running through the central core was a huge planetarium-like array of lenses. Operators watched the Opted ceaselessly through a thousand eyes.

Of course the bastard didn't die.

When he recovered from the fever, and was carried from the infirmary to his cell by the remote pod and welded in, I ran another battery of diagnostics on him: a MMPI, a Stanford Binet. He filled out the forms on his terminal. They didn't prove anything, really, but we ran them anyway. He matched his old scores almost perfectly.

Liar.

He looked like a different person, the way he held himself, his facial expression. I was used to this. It was like watching a great actor in a new role. He didn't seem to be withdrawing the way the nonresponsives did.

"Did you know that you were dyslexic?"

He shrugged. "I knew the word." He sat straight in his molded plastic chair. He'd cut his curly ash hair close to his skull with the blunted child's scissors we allowed prisoners.

"You were right not to talk about it," I told him. "We wouldn't

have accepted you if we'd known. You're too smart for the program."

"Too smart?" He laughed. "I thought that was the whole idea?"

"Yes. The trouble is, when you get too far ahead of us, we can't understand what you're doing. Some of you trick people; start researchers down blind alleys, seduce them with beautiful, symmetrical theories that turn out to be totally misguided. You waste their time."

He nodded quickly, his face neutral "Yes, I can see how that might happen. So what happens to us, exactly?"

"You pay your debt to society. The first false start, the first wasted experiment, the first blind alley, the men in charge complete your sentence. You're not just *legally* dead then--you're *dead*."

"So you're not in charge, Doctor?"

How to say I didn't like this much more than he did, but that there had been no point where backing out made sense? I'd started out trying to cure a disease and ended up baby-sitting a bunch of psychopaths. Each step had made some kind of sense, in its local context.

I didn't think they could let me just quit anymore. Mikal was waiting for an answer.

"I'm not in charge," I said. "I just work here."

I monitored his net traffic and library usage. He read fast, like most of them do, and I couldn't hope to keep up with him, but I charted the course of his studies. I opened a UAD, University Access for the Disabled, account for him at Harvard, and he was arguing with Ph.D.s in half a dozen biologically related fields in six weeks. His posts were lucid, penetrating, and having some effect in several research teams working with recombinant DNA.

After a few weeks I saw where he was going.

"Mikal." I interrupted him one day, his monitor suddenly blanking as my voice came over the loudspeaker. He'd lost weight, which was typical. Opted prisoners experience an acceleration of metabolism, they start to live faster. In a year he'd be fluttering around his cage like a bird.

"Yes?" He looked out at the monitor, his face impassive.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"I thought I was doing my job."

"Do you enjoy being alive, Mikal?" He flinched, and I felt rotten, but the point had to be made. We'd lost so many. "Don't screw with us. Your correspondents are halfway to sequencing Eich Lipman. Do you know what that is?"

He shook his head again.

"Like hell you don't. It's the virus we used on you. It's classified. Very classified. We don't give out that kind of information. Its dangerous. Remember rule number 2?"

He quoted it. "No participant in the program may disseminate military technology, or technology that could conceivably be used by the military, on public access bulletin boards--"

"Exactly, Mikal. There's no one out there to talk to about this. Find something else to play with. Understand?"

He nodded, his face studiously neutral. But those damn blue eyes of his were smiling.

He was prying into his court case. The one we'd killed him for--digging through newspaper and magazine archives, searching for anything relevant to his conviction. I reminded him he was legally dead.

"I know you don't care, that you don't believe me, but I'm innocent. I deserve a chance to prove it."

I coughed into the console mike. None of them spoke of innocence, afterwards. Not one.

"Mikal, what does that matter now, really? You know we can't let you go."



He turned away from the camera. "I know that. I have a family. They've been disgraced. I don't care if I get out or not. I want them to know the truth. That's all."

"I'm sorry. Look, I'll let you use some connect time, an hour a day, but no more."

He nodded without looking up. "When I'm done will you look at my case?"

"Sure," I said. What could it hurt?

A couple of weeks later he presented me his work. I looked over the files. Court records, sworn affidavits, even the grainy security camera footage that showed a blurry somebody slitting the attendant's throat. I read through it all with a gradually mounting panic.

He was innocent.

His eyes peered through the plexiglas wall of the Panopticon, straight into the monitor; straight into me, as if the camera and intervening miles of optical cable weren't even there.

What does it matter how it happened? The boy who had obviously done the killing was the son-in-law of the local sheriff. Mikal had been sleeping off a drunk in his lock-up.

"Interesting," I said, when I'd found my voice. "You definitely have enough here for an appeal. If you were alive."

He nodded. "I would like to send this to my brother." I called up his brother's name. He was working as an attorney in Washington, D.C.

"Jesus, Mikal." His court appointed lawyer had been worse than incompetent. *She hadn't even been in the courtroom.* "Why didn't you ask him to help you when this was going on?"

"We weren't close." Mikal said, looking away.

I told him I'd see what I could do and severed the connection. Then I called up his death certificate. It said he'd died by lethal injection. Eich/Lipman wasn't lethal, though. Not all the time, at least, and not right away.

We're still not sure exactly how he got out. The welds on his cell door were intact. The Panopticon video showed nothing. One minute he was there, the next he was not. One mirror-eyed goon suggested teleportation--with a straight face.

The computer records indicated he had achieved super-user status on the Panopticon mainframe. There was no telling who he'd been in communication with on the outside, or what they might have done to free him.

The only thing the Agency knew for sure was that he'd gotten access to the system with my password.

We had every Opted prisoner working on the problem. How could we catch one of them who had escaped?

The answers kept coming back negative. We couldn't. The Agency wouldn't take no for an answer. Lenette, a Texan mass murderer, admitted to me that it was worse than hopeless. *She* couldn't catch Mikal.

I asked her what she thought he was doing with the plagues exactly. Was he trying to kill us all?

No, she giggled, there were far easier ways to go about doing that. I pressed the point, but she wouldn't answer a straight question, claiming she didn't want to give away the surprise.

They sanctioned her on closed-circuit TV, slowly, piping the interrogation into every prisoner's cell. She never stopped giggling, not even after they'd removed every square inch of skin from her body. Halfway through the procedure I'd tendered my resignation, and put my foot through my console.

I was right about quitting. They wouldn't let me out of my apartment, afterwards. One of my jailers had enough of a sense of humor to place a sticky-note on one of my food deliveries.

"Welcome to the Panopticon," it said.

I slept a lot, and listened to classical music on the radio. I'd never really had a lot of time for music. I listened to a particularly lovely passage, Pacabell's Canon in D major. Serene. Mikal's chuckle propelled me from the lounge, knocking over the end table, sending a tall stack of paperback novels to the carpet.

"Shit!"

"Hello, Doctor." The voice came from above. I whirled around.

His laughter came from the chandelier, a horrible plastic thing hanging over the dining area table. We'd always meant to replace it.

"This is the Agency's bug," he said. "I've tied into their systems pretty thoroughly now."

I inspected the fixture and found the bug/speaker. It was the size of a bottle cap, taped up under the lucite diffusing rim. I carried it to the garbage disposal.

"I'm sorry, Mikal." I said. "Sorry I picked you. Sorry about your conviction." My voice cracked. "I'm sorry about the monkey keys, too."

I pushed the bug past the black plastic flaps into the maw of the thing, and flicked the switch. I ground it until the motor burned out. The sound was unbelievable.

I ended up rigging a TV aerial from a coat hanger and wire. I was restricted to the local and national news. Nothing about the plague's obviously gene-tailored ancestry had percolated through to the evening news. I would give it about another day. Big secrets are hard to keep. I shut off the set and fell into a fitful sleep.

When I awoke, my headache had been joined by muscle pains and heart palpitations. Sweat ran from my face in rivulets, but I felt cold.

I looked at myself in the bathroom mirror. Outside a siren blared, echoing up the brick canyon of condo towers. My eyes were almost swollen shut. I tried to laugh, but ended up wheezing weakly.

This wasn't a migraine. I had the plague.

I finally figured out how to switch channels without the cable box, and sure enough Channel One was on the air. It was the god-damned emergency broadcast system we'd all been threatened with since childhood. The newscaster, a scared looking older man with slicked back hair, was saying something about lying still, drinking lots of fluids, and controlling fever with aspirin. There was no point going to the hospitals--they were full.

I filled a soup kettle with tap water, tossed a glass in, and dragged it back to the sofa. I wouldn't be able to walk soon, and I would need those fluids. I lay back down and took a long drink, wiping the sweat from my forehead with the back of my hand. The water couldn't hurt me now. I was already infected.

The incubation period was over. What the newscaster hadn't mentioned was that there was only about a one in ten chance of surviving a bout of T-140. It was an old Soviet bioweapon brought out of the decaying empire by an Islamic nationalist movement. Eich and I had worked with the disease. T-140 was incurable, if occasionally survivable.

Around the time the buzzing in my ears had drowned the sound of the TV, I dug out the purple velvet Crown Royal bag from a closet, a gaming relic from my college days. I shook it open on the carpet, a spray of candy-colored platonic solids, plastic nuggets of probability.

I picked a clear icosahedron, and rolled it on the coffee table.

I got a four. That meant I died.

The door buzzer woke me. I crawled to the kitchen, and batted at the entry hall phone. The handset clattered on the floor. I lay my head beside the mouthpiece, the tile delightfully cool against my cheek.

"Mikal," I groped for the button to open the door, before realizing that wasn't necessary. "What took you?"

"Monkey troubles."

I lay there, waiting for him to appear. I hoped he'd do whatever he was going to do quickly.

Suddenly he was standing over me grinning, his piebald arms flashing from a bright red T-shirt, a mane of golden curls almost concealing the blue of his eyes. His hair was growing so fast you could almost see it.

"Thanks for the password," he said.

"My mistake." I hadn't consciously let him go, had I? No, I'll deny that until the end. I gave him the code to contact his brother. But why hadn't I simply forwarded his message through my account? "I was brought up wrong. My parents were liberals."

Something stung my arm. His face zoomed in, his breath toothpaste sweet. "The antidote." His long fingernails etched tingling lines down my cheek.

"For the T-140. Not Eich/Lipman."

I blinked up at him, comprehension penetrating the fever slowly. The T-140 Bacterium carried the virus. It was a delivery vehicle. Eich/Lipman was fragile, we'd had to inject it directly into patient's brains. Mikal had found a better way.

"You're not going to kill me?"

Mikal's head blurred. "Of course not. What do you think I am, an animal? You'll feel better in a couple of hours or so. If you live. I'll be back for you then." I blinked, and he was standing. The injector in his hand was an old UN model, with a fat vial mounted underneath. Probably good for a thousand injections.

He could cure us of one plague. But not the other. Genius was a disease. I had it now.

I found myself halfway hoping I would die of the fever.

Of course I didn't.

PW

DEATH'S FAVORITE SNAPSHOT

The perfect horror found in nature:
a praying mantis poised on a milkweed,
claws at ready,
while out of reach of those claws
a yellow-jacket wasp devours the mantis,
starting at the nether end,
wriggling into the growing cavity
where the abdomen used to be.

And still the mantis stupidly waits,
for dinner it can no longer digest.
"Look at it this way," says the wasp.
"the pain may be unbearable,
but at least you get to wear
my splendid, striped coat."

--Darrell Schweitzer

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Short-Short Section

YOU OPEN YOUR EYES TO FIND you are still moving. There is a musty smell in the air, one of death. Momentarily you pause and look out across the gathering that has come to pay tribute to the last bastion of tradition left in the world.

You see your Aunt Rita as she sits half

The voices are fading now as music begins streaming from an old organ. Your palms sweat, you can feel your stomach turning in knots. It is almost time.

Looking deeper into the crowd you see Ray. He is sitting next to his new girlfriend.

You remember winning the county cham-

pionship. Ray as quarterback, you as wide receiver. With one pass you both had become legends. You don't feel like a legend.

Suddenly there is someone calling your name. The person is close at hand and you struggle to focus your eyes as the person appro-

"Honey, honey, have you listened to one word I've said?" asks your mother. You look at her as if she had just appeared. She looks good to you, young. Her white suit shines with silver beads that shimmer in the light when she moves.

"Yes, of course I have," you lie. She continues blithering. You remember the night she and your father told you they were getting divorced. The ring in your hand bites at you. You remember sitting in the recliner and listening to your father tell you it wasn't your fault. You recall wondering how it would affect you. Would things be harder, easier. With cold indignation you brushed it aside, you didn't care.

Your sister on the other hand cared too much, or was it that she saw it as an opportunity? As if on cue you hear your godson cry out as your sister pulls a bottle from his mouth. He slaps at her and you can't help but laugh. You mother turns and shakes her head.

In a tumult, the music begins to rise and you see everyone scattering toward their seats. You feel a tap on your shoulder. Turning, you see Rob. He also straightens your lapel and you wonder if you have put the jacket on wrong.

"Well, it's time, bud. You ready?" he asks.

You feel sick, almost as if your entire stomach is about to jump out through your mouth. You rub your eyes and hand him the ring. He holds it up and for an instant you see the image of his eye gleaming through the golden circle. Neverending. You have to go to the bathroom, but it's too late.

The entire crowd is now standing and staring with awe at the rear of the church.

Seconds In Time

by Brendon Adams

bent and broken in the first pew. She smiles at you. You can remember her when she was young; running on the grass at picnics, throwing the football to cousin Jay. She looks older to you now than she ever has before. You remember how mature you are becoming, how old you will be by the end of this day.

A white mist seems to hang over the small crowd. Your alcohol-induced dream is fading. You can hear your father talking to your uncle.

Your father. You haven't seen much of him lately. You promise yourself to make more time, but you never do. Yet, even when you don't need him, he has always been there for you, but you have never told him. Instead, you question, lay blame and guilt, never once facing the possibility that you are the one who is wrong. Somehow, it's much easier that way.

achs you.

It's your mother. She begins straightening your tie and brushing the lapels of your jacket. Her mouth is moving, but somehow you can't hear her words, only muffled sounds in high pitched tones. You think of Charlie Brown and how his teacher talked. Wonk, wonk, wonk, wonk. You concentrate, trying to understand her, but you're beginning to fade. Your eyes are dropping and you can't remember why you are there. You panic, putting your hands in your pockets.

Then you feel the cold steel of the ring. Your mother is still talking as you slip the band on your pinkie. You pull it off and turn it over and over in your hand. For an instant you are tempted to throw it. Throw it far away and run. You see Ray again and he gives you a nodding smile of agreement. Yet something holds you back.

Rob pats you on the back and jokes, "You can still run." For an instant you consider his words. There is a door to your right and you can see light through its glass. You feel the sudden urge to rush out the door, toward the light. The compulsion is fierce, but something keeps you stationary. You look to your father for aid and he stares back. In this he can not help you. He has a stern expression on his face, as if he had been right were you are once. He looks like he wants to run through the door, but instead he turns away.

In that last instant you are truly alone. Gloria is halfway down the aisle, walking slowly with her father at her side. Immediately Jay notices your anxiety as he stands next to Gloria's brother. The black tuxedos accent the females in the bridal party perfectly. Gloria had thought of everything.

Time had run out and you still stand waiting on the altar. Your palms sweat more than ever, your eyes dart around the church, you can't look at Gloria. The priest steps forward and begins to read, but you can't understand the words. Your gaze again falls on the door. You can still run, but you don't.

Finally you are being prodded, the priest has paused and you look at him with confused eyes. He gently nods his head and you say, "I do."

PW

THE FAINT ODORS STILL LINGERING in the room told Inspector Monrose that someone had been here mere moments ago--and he was inclined to think that this

Ah yes, the appointment. As Inspector Monrose let his gaze roam all around the room, not missing the slightest detail, his thoughts returned to the note he had received. An anonymous note, neatly folded in a manila envelope along with a key. That key would gain him entry to the house on 66 Heybourne Street, and the note explained why he would want to drop by at the specific hour mentioned. "Use this key," the note had ended, "and come alone."

The author of the note must have been very well informed about his current activities. "I know you've been investigating this recent batch of mysterious suicide cases," the note read, "and I understand you're also supposed to track down the pyromaniac who has been active in Westport lately. I chose to extend a helping hand to you, as I think I can shed some light on these mysteries. I doubt you will be able to solve them, though." He had accepted the invitation and its conditions--although he had agreed to come alone, a few men were keeping an eye on the house from a number of vantage points in the area. Only the flimsiest bits of information could be gleaned from this note. If anything, it raised a host of further questions. Was there a link between the suicides (or cleverly disguised murders, as one theory had it) and the pyromaniac's actions? Was the anonymous author of the note the link? Was he in some way involved in these crimes? If this visit to 66 Heybourne Street could help Monrose in getting on the right track, he would be very satisfied indeed.

Monrose had finished his inspection of the first floor. Nothing in particular had caught his attention. Slowly, careful not to make any sound, he ascended the flight of stairs leading to the second floor, throwing glances in all directions, ready for anything. He could not allow himself to be off his guard for even a second. One moment of inattention might

quite literally cost him his life.

The second floor had little to offer. A nicely furnished bedroom, an immaculately clean bathroom--both empty--a storage room filled with the usual assortment of household appliances. The silence appeared to be deepening--so did his unease. As he began his climb to the third floor, he noted that the smells were intensifying. He remained motionless for a few moments, sniffing, analyzing. The mixture of odors now swirling and wafting around

him were hard to identify. Were the components too diverse, or were there just too many of them? He would never know if he didn't move from this spot on the stairs.

On the third floor he was hit by a maddening kaleidoscope of scents, utterly confusing his senses, totally unanalyzable, overloading his deductive powers. He steadied himself, trying to erect a screen blocking this olfactory inferno, working up a tolerance against the sensory overkill, hopefully allowing him to cut through its dense layers and get a grip on the situation at hand. Gradually, his perception returned to normal and he could at last find his bearings.

He was in an office, lined with books all around, cluttered with stacks of papers and folders and fat, bulging envelopes. Heavy curtains all but covered up the one tiny window. There was a desk, also piled full with typical office paraphernalia. Disappointingly, there was no one waiting for him. Whoever had invited him was no longer here.

He had to concentrate with nerve-racking intensity to determine what his nostrils detected. There was still some pipe tobacco, but now it had faded deep down in the mixture. The most prominent smells were those of gasoline, strongly present, reminding him of the oppressive, smothering stench one was engulfed by at gas service stations in the blazing summer heat; the nauseating, sticky aroma of liquid chocolate; the breathtaking exotic perfumes, as if an army of top-class models had paraded through this dusty office only seconds ago; the unexpectedly invigorating smell of piping hot coffee; and finally, unsurprisingly, the nose-tickling dust-laden atmosphere of old libraries without ventilation or air-conditioning. The olfactory map of this room was a complex and unusual one, an odd number of elements artificially introduced here and blended into a maddening tapestry clearly meant to hide information rather than provide any.

Then he saw the note on the desk. He picked it up, barely able to keep his hand from trembling.

By the time you read this I've already left the premises. I hope you enjoyed my farewell present. I've concocted a special brew for you. But seriously, now. Let's get down to brass tacks. It will only take a whiff of smoke. Let the dying embers light your way to the clue that will unlock this mystery for you. If you need assistance, the Good Doctor will gladly be of help. Well, my friend, finish your job now--and let me continue to do mine.

Inspector Monrose's gaze swept across

A WHIFF OF SMOKE, A TASTE OF DEATH

by Frank R.F. De Cuyper

man would probably still be somewhere in the house. A man, because the tobacco he had smelled as he had entered 66 Heybourne Street clearly belonged in a pipe. There were other fragrances as well, all intermingled with the more pervasive presence of pipe tobacco: sticky sweat, stale beer, cigarette smoke. So the man had been smoking a pipe, but he had spent some time in a sleazy smoke-filled bar before coming over here for his appointment.

the room, focussed once again on the desk. Dying embers? There was a pipe on the desk. He picked it up, found it was still warm. The Good Doctor? There were stacks of papers on the desk, and a pile of paperbacks. He studied the titles on their spines, ran down the authors' names mentioned as well. Wasn't the Good Doctor a nickname for a writer? A rather well-known American writer? One of the books was by Isaac Asimov, a scientist turned writer, he recalled. Quite famous for his popular science books, and mysteries, and science fiction. He had to be the one. He plucked the book out of the pile, glanced at the title: A Whiff Of Death. A mystery novel indeed.

As he turned the book around in his hands to read the blurbs on the back cover, he noticed it was very moist, as if it had been drenched in some sticky liquid, an oily substance. Was it the smell of kerosene he detected? No, some kind of grease, or perhaps oil and vinegar? It was impossible to be sure in this chaos of fragrances. He opened the book to read the opening sentences, but his by now oil-slicked fingers lost their grip and everything dropped to the floor, the note, the pipe and the paperback. As he sank to his knees to pick it all back up, he noticed how dying embers tumbled out of the pipe and onto the book and the boarded floor.

Immediately flames lit up. The book had indeed been drenched in a highly inflammable liquid. So apparently had the floor. And, he suddenly realized, most of the contents of this room.

Oh yes, he thought, as the bookcase-lined and paper-cluttered room erupted into voracious flames all around him, and smoke started billowing, I think I understand now. The author of the note is both the murderer behind the so-called suicides and the pyromaniac. And I, Inspector Monroe concluded, am simply his next victim, nicely combining his two lines of crime: to an outside observer my death might pass for a suicide, and this further case of arson will allow the criminal to continue his evil work. How very clever. Inventive. Not to mention well-researched, judging from the skillful use made of his particular approach and methods. Praise-worthy. Camouflaging the critical odor had been a most brilliant idea.

It's all clear to me now, he thought, at once resigned and satisfied, as the quickly spreading fire totally engulfed him.

PW

CHILTON SWIRLED HIS BEER around within the smoky brown bottle.

"But Star Trek was set only a couple of centuries ahead. Heinlein's Future History, Smith's Instrumentality, Niven's Known Space--they all just dipped their toes in the infinite oceans of time stretching out before us."

Burly, bearded Rabinski stood across the room, arguing with pencil-thin Sedgwick over the period authenticity of the new Arthurian series from the BBC. Cox and the others, however, stood in a semi-circle around Chilton, paying at least minimal attention.

"In the early days of science fiction," Chilton continued, "writers seemed less inhibited. Look at Wells' Time Machine. The main action takes place in the Morlocks' era, the year..."

He paused. Griffith lowered his tumbler of ice tea and filled the void:

"Eight hundred and two thousand, seven hundred and one!"

Chilton smiled thinly.

"Thank you, Captain Trivia. It's true, though. After the Morlocks, the Time Traveller visits the end of the world, when the sun has all but burned out. Hodgson's House on the Borderland has a similar plot, with the hero travelling billions of years into the future. And House was published in 1912."

Pokurov, the bespectacled creator of the Venus Colony series, coughed politely.

"You're forgetting Stapledon..."

Chilton, in the middle of a swig, pointed at him.

"Just getting to him!" he exclaimed after he swallowed. "Last and First Men. Stretches from the 1930's to A.D. Two Billion! He had to chart it like scientists chart geological epochs. But his books were philosophical treatises--not big on action. Besides, even *that* was back in 1930."

The writer spread his arms wide, gazing far beyond his audience, a God contemplating Creation with an empty Heineken bottle in one hand.

"Why not adventures over hundreds of thousands of years? Millions, even billions? I see the Eons series following the life of the universe, the T'chali Empire spreading across the spiral arms, then to other galaxies, crashing into other empires, each one taking up a substantial portion of the cosmos--"

Janette Kyle, prominent author of the six "Psychodyne" novels, worked her way to the front of the gathering.

"Big words, Greg. Just remember:

Talk us to death with your ideas, and you'll lose the drive to write 'em down. Like Ellison said."

"I thought that was Bradbury," said Cox, the editorial assistant from Fantasy Stories.

"Everybody's said that," interrupted Griffith, "because it's true."

Janette fixed Chilton with her jade green eyes and her patented elf-grin.

"The proof is in the pudding, Greg.

Future History

by Michael D. Winkle

Write one of these cosmic adventures, then we'll be impressed."

"Maybe," added Griffith.

Just a short at first, thought Chilton on the way home, so I can show something to the Fictioneers' Club next month.

The '22 Tawara Badger hummed down the highway as he ran his fingers over the keyboard. Something simple, but eons and parsecs away. First contact between the T'chali Empire and another galaxy. Wouldn't be until, oh, ten thousand years after the beginning of space travel. Heck, make it forty thousand. It takes a while to conquer a galaxy.

The Badger rolled up into Chilton's driveway.

"We have arrived, Mr. Chilton," the onboard P.C. announced.

"Thanks, Badge," muttered the writer. "Save file TCHALI backslash CONTACT point zero zero one. Copy to house."

He sat up through the night at his creation station, sometimes key-entering, sometimes dictating. A third party, more powerful than either empire? No--too much like Brown's "Arena" and its clones. A meeting of exact equals? Unlikely. Besides, that called to mind Leinster's "First Contact." The extragalactics should be markedly superior to the T'Chali, and truly alien. Yes. He envisioned quasi-energy forms like squashed jellyfish. Their ships were little more than shells around them, keeping their substance from dispersing.

He whispered "The end" as the night sky grew purple-grey, then he slept.

He woke at the crack of dinner and spent three hours revising. At nine P.M. he swallowed a handful of V-pills with his espresso.

"To hell with the Fictioneers," he cried as he scanned the story again. "This is ready to go!"

He called up the address of Cosmic Stories and e-mailed "Contact Sports" to their offices in New Jersey.

He checked the mail the next day at noon. He spotted the legend Cosmic Stories and scrolled up the rest of the letter excitedly:

Esteemed Terrestrial:

We regret to inform you that your story, "Contact Sports," is not suitable for our present needs. As with many novice writers, you insist on equipping starships with "Faster Than Light" drive, which, as our scientists have demonstrated to yours, cannot exist. Also, there is no planet resembling your T'chal in the Beta Crucis system, as our probes in that area of the galaxy have shown conclusively.

As for your other proposed series, "Times of Change"; as our scientist have also proven, time travel is not possible. If you wish to have a reasonable chance of publication in Cosmic Tales, please try to keep within the realms of logic. Why not a set of essays covering our mutually beneficial trade agreements?

*Respectfully yours,
Oquikomm Xichar, Editor*

Chilton stared at the beryl-blue screen for five minutes.

"Science fiction was more fun before the aliens landed," he grumbled.

PW

THE WEEKLY SUPPLY CARRIER was overdue.

McMurty listened to his men grumble. Then he sent them and their great lumbering crawler out onto the alien, rocky barrens to scoop stone and sand, digest it, combine it with polymer from great holding tanks, and lay down a spoor-like ribbon of clean new road. They could work another day without the updated map. But that was hardly McMurty's concern--they'd run out of food and water in two days unless the carrier showed. Being twenty-two days out of Heelston, with the fastest vehicle a thirty-mile-per-hour service shuttle--

The evening meal was subdued, furtive looks from man to man knowing something dangerous was happening to them. Not why; just that. And as a choir falls silent when the words are used up, they sat quietly and stared at McMurty. Waited for the reassurance

obliged to leaders.

"Carrier's overdue," McMurty at last intoned to break the tension. Then, dutiful words: "Sure it'll be here tomorrow."

More silence, then one of the men finally cleared his throat tentatively, and said, "But what if--"

"No!" McMurty said. "No what if. The Road Department knows its stuff."

There was no work the next day, as there was no supply carrier and no new map. And idle men brought up complaints from their guts like old mucus, things not usually voiced but always understood way inside.

"Why do they take the old maps back each week?"

"Policy. Possible litter. Waste prevention rules."

"And the maps don't even really tell you where you are."

"No need to know. You're here to work, not sightsee."

"Only a week's food and water at a time."

"Fuel and polymer take up lots of space; no room on the supply carriers for extra food. Procedures."

"And not one of us here knows this territory."

"Selection policy. People get moved around."

"And what about these damn slow vehicles?"

"No need for racing out here."

"Why such a short range on our radios?"

"Rules on EMF power."

"Why do they make the rules so far away from the actual work?"

When humanity exported itself into the far reaches of space, propelled by its achievement technology--that vast body of knowledge and things generally equated with progress--its other achievement called bureaucracy went along.

There is no measure of whether one of these achievements outraced the other into the cosmos; such is unimportant. Nor is there need to ponder any right or wrong which might attach to them--like any of man's things, such as cruelty or striving,

they simply are.

Hunger and thirst, laid on idleness, grew an edgy desperation onto the road men. McMurty broke up a squabble in the afternoon of the fourth workless day, which he might have joined himself had he not understood and feared the probable outcome.

Once the giant star had finished baking their landscape for the day, McMurty herded the men from the bunk crawler onto the cooling barrens, to save power. A battered camplight substituted for this pioneer world's lack of a natural satellite. He distributed the evening's small water ration.

The chatter was not edgy, McMurty figured because the earlier tiff had blown off some steam. Others would come, he knew. But at least for now the men seemed mostly interested in sleep, as the talk trailed off.

A fellow named Corey heard the sound first. A slight machine-rustling somewhere on the road they had been laying for weeks now. He mouthed the word, "listen," softly, then cupped a hand to an ear and waited for someone to agree. Minutes passed.

And then, one by one, the others nodded in silence. They stood, anticipating. Distinct now, machine noise, and growing--oh, thank God, most definitely growing way off on the endless rocky sandy reaches, where it had been decided once upon a time in committee that a road must certainly be laid to connect the base at Heelston with the mines at Endapol.

The camplight showed smiles all around.

"See?" McMurty said. "Supply carrier. You damn fools--lost your trust in the Road Department."

In the flood of emotion they felt when given back their lives, nervous laughter broke a thick tension into bits of imaginary glass that fell in a dying rain onto the still-warm ground. There was never reason for jubilation on the barrens; there was the job, joking and laughter, and light evening pleasures--nothing more.

Closer pushed the noise, and cheers gave way to comfort and a renewed sense

The Road Men

by Zack Smith

of security. Closer till whooshing became rumbling, tangible against the soles of their feet. McMurty divided the remainder of the water among his men to celebrate.

For the ten hours of night the thundering mounted. No one slept.

When the giant star made morning on the horizon, they spotted the machine. Then saw more of it, broadening into view, at last enough to identify. No, *them*--clearly there was more than one machine.

And no supply carrier among them.

McMurty and his road men stood cold and rigid on the smooth, unobtrusively colored surface they had made just days before, watching the approach. Watching for the better part of an hour, as the machines lumbered toward them like great mythical animals. To within twenty feet of where they stood. With a great gasping, the engines powered down in unison.

A minute later, a weather-toughened man climbed down to face McMurty. He surveyed the equipment standing idle be-

hind McMurty's men, then spoke:

"Lewellyn. Road removal and landscape restoration. Due to meet a supply carrier from Endapol today."

McMurty looked hard into Lewellyn's eyes, speechless, measuring the air he swallowed. Finally, Lewellyn's eyes began to tint with concern, a trace of wildness beginning somewhere. Reaching to his belt, he grabbed his hip-pack and took a swallow of water to wash the sudden dryness from his throat.

For endless time, the two men measured one another and themselves against the vast scorched dry sand dead rock landscape neither of them knew.

McMurty felt himself lunge.

Code of Regulations

*Roads, Waterways, Skyways,
Space Routes*

*Regulation 811632-D: Road
Department*

Revision 2621: 08.18.23

*Applies to: Road Construction
Road Removal and Landscape
Restoration*

Revised Section: 46(c)(4)(B)(1)

Revision: In service sectors

*wherein no established supply
centers are located within one
day's travel distance by a Code
818B or 1016XR or 2277D service
shuttle....*

PW

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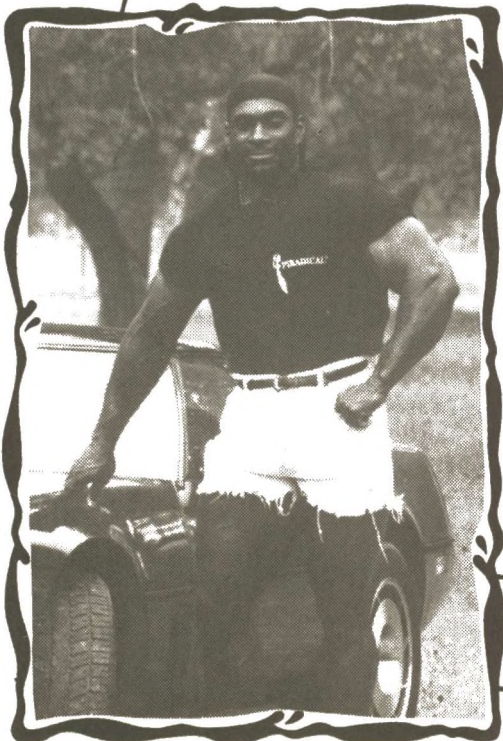
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Featured Poet

WINTER MOONLIGHT

Sleeping in winter moonlight
brings dreams of water:
marshes sleeping deep
undersnow,
granite dreaming
of undertow.

Sleeping in winter moonlight
brings fox-thin dreams
soft-stepping
across snow,
as quiet as the fall shadows
cast by russet ghosts
about their business.

Here a feather
in the snow,
here a mouse bone
by the frozen pond,
here a drop of blood
where the thorn point
pierced my skin.

My finger stings
and I wake in winter moonlight,
look out across
the blue ghost fields
to see the moonlight
slip away.

But before I leave the bed
and dreams have completely
fled to sleep,
I remember water:

Vast expanses
boiling with life,
fields of ice;
not that these eyes have seen,
but that my spirit
once knew.

TAROT

What she said:
You turn from me
as I turn
from the cards
refusing to face
what we see.



THE ACT OF IMMERSION

Sometimes
it is only by embracing
another's voice
that we find our own.



SUMMER LEAVES

In the deep woods
where the sun comes
cathedraling down
through the boughs
high above:
light shaped
like leaves
falls about me,
upon the leaves,
upon the shadows
shaped like leaves;
so many greens,
the light and the shadowed
of those leaves.
that I fear my palette
will be woefully inadequate
to the task of their capture.

That day,
I lay the brush aside,
and let myself
simply fall into the green,
holding the memory,
rather than on paper
—not for fear of failure,
but because the memory
will be more dear.



Charles de Lint is the author of many books including Memory and Dream and Jack of Kinrowan. His short fiction has appeared in numerous anthologies and magazines.

Charles de Lint



CERONE

Christine Beckert is a promising new writer whose work had appeared in Amazing Stories, The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction and After Hours. About "Scavenger Hunt" she writes, "I believe horror can be a literary form--not splatter and shrieks but horrid imagination, the darkness that sheds light. Nothing horrible happens in 'Scavenger Hunt', but it reveals such a darkness."

Scavenger Hunt

*Sometimes life can be
the greatest show.*

THE DINER IS ABOUT HALF FULL JUST NOW, though it's eleven o'clock at night. It's hot--Rudy, the owner, likes it that way--and the old radiators hiss and clink in accompaniment to spoons and soft voices. Mooney's is famous all along this stretch of Route 1--the only eatery for miles in either direction and the only one open twenty-four hours a day for an even longer stretch. I'm just filling time with an endless cup of coffee, but Sally doesn't seem to mind. She nods as she refills my cup, willing to chat, but I don't encourage her. She knows me well enough not to press. I spend too much time here, I know, eating too many blueberry muffins, drinking too many cups of coffee. But there's something to be said about Mooney's; the regulars and the staff respect each other and make allowances. That counts for a lot sometimes. I watch Sally exchanging pleasantries with other customers, but she seems to linger longest with her pot at one particular table.

They are remarkably fine-looking people, that mother and son sitting in the booth catty-corner to mine. At least I assume they're mother and son--the family resemblance is strong. He's in his mid-twenties, I'd say, with a marvelous shock of bronzy blond hair falling over his forehead. His face is tanned and warm and gorgeous, fit for a magazine cover. His teeth gleam. The mother must be at least mid-forties, but I say that only because she's with him--she actually looks no more than thirty-five, with the same thick blond hair, worn careless and shoulder-length in her case, the same fine bones, the same healthy teeth.

Yet I know they're not sister and brother, those two. He is definitely young, not fully formed yet, not altogether settled into his adult face. The woman, on the other hand, despite her youthfulness, has an indefinable look of maturity about her, an etch of character crafted by the years. She will teach her son, I think, lead him to that face.

Mother and Sonny are clearly crazy about each other. They are chatting animatedly, though in tones too low for me to hear. They smile often and laugh aloud. At one point Sonny leans over and pokes Mother in the arm in obvious affection, and at another she reaches over and brushes back the hair on his forehead.

Given my position and the low sides of the booth, I can observe them with relative ease, and I notice that they are the object of other diners' attention, too. An elderly couple at the counter nudge each other and smile, obviously touched by the charming scene.

I'm not charmed but I am envious--easy diagnosis. My own father ran out on us when I was eleven, but my mother's only response was to add one more toast to her litany. "Let's drink

BY CHRISTINE BECKERT

Illustrated by Darren Cerone

to your father," she'd say, her slur distorting her sneer. We survived, my brother Theo and I, but we did not grieve unduly when she died of cirrhosis some years later. Nor did we come together--I think we each judged the other as the probable cause of our sordid problems, a fiction that permitted us to avoid blaming ourselves.

Someone else is sitting with Mother and Sonny, but it's odd--the two of them are so attractive and dramatic that you really don't notice her. Now I do, however, as she gently pushes at Sonny's arm and he rises to let her out. Now I see her clearly, a small, pleasant-looking young woman. She's not unattractive--in another setting she might even be pretty, if a bit diluted. But next to Mother and Sonny she almost disappears, her light brown hair and pale complexion fading into inconsequence next to their glittery presence.

And now I notice something else, too--she's pregnant, fairly far along, perhaps seven or eight months. I turn slightly as she passes my table, heading for the ladies' room. Just before she enters, she turns to glance back at Mother and Sonny, who--I quickly look myself--are unaware of her gaze and, I dare say, of her absence. My eyes flash back to the young woman and I fancy I see a faint smile, not a fond one. No, I fancy I see triumph at some small victory, some small escape.

Interesting thought, that, and I turn back to Mother and Sonny with a new perspective. They are so strong, so highly colored, so vibrant--and so much alike. I wonder about Mother's husband and imagine him as inconspicuous as the young woman. Or perhaps he is already dead or discarded, now that the young woman is on hand. And when her child is born--what then? I know, I *know* it will be strong and healthy, red and wailing at birth but soon bronze and blond--probably a little girl so that Grandma can instruct her precisely. And *she* will grow up and find a mild man and have a son, blond and bronze, and Sonny--

her father--will show his grandson how it's done--

And meanwhile the young woman, *this* young woman, her task done, will grow paler and smaller and weaker as Mother and Sonny and baby feed on her and rest content in each other's company--

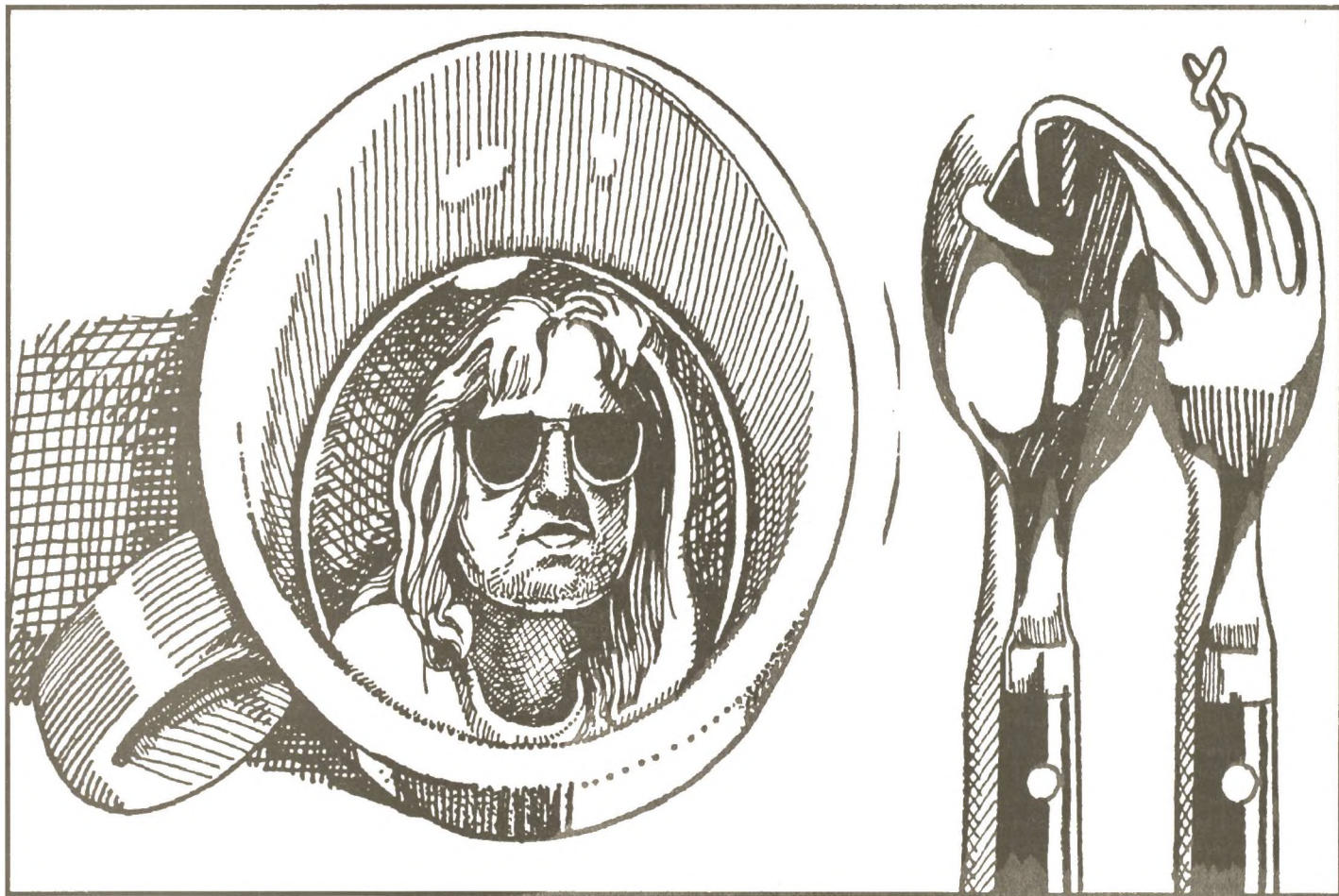
The image pleases me.

It is not the first such story I have woven. Strangers coming within one's ken for a few minutes--why not flesh them out? They are for sure a good deal more than the oblivion or irritation or glee that you happen to see for a few minutes or hours on the street, in the library, on a plane. They are flesh and blood, and they have their needs and their hungers and their satisfactions and their lives. Why not intrude on those lives with your thoughts? Why not enrich your own life with pieces of theirs?

Take children, for example. I have never had any of my own, though at one time I thought they would blossom within me and bloom like roses sprung from my spirit. When they didn't come, I thought myself desolate, for a while, until I came to see how much pruning and pinching and fertilizing and pampering and warmth they need. Then I saw them for what they are.

I remember one young boy, about thirteen or fourteen, part of a group of boys cruising the station once while I was waiting for a train. The boys were checking the place out, wandering in and out of the shops that lined the concourse, making ribald comments about the tourist mugs and T-shirts, staring insolently at customers, wising off when the shopkeepers told them to move on. They weren't really causing any trouble, those boys, but they were a presence that no one could ignore. Other strollers and waiting passengers knew right where they were, kept tabs on them with the edge of vision, braced themselves to respond if the boys intruded on their space.

Sitting next to a wall as I was, I could watch them with a bit



more freedom, unlikely to be perceived as hostile or judgmental. One boy, I could see, was clearly the leader. His nudges, his gestures determined their route, his voice led the mockery. Yet he was an odd choice to hold authority--he was small, for one thing, and for another his lips, heavy and coarse, were a brilliant red--a trait that should have made him the butt of the endless gibes and mindless cruelty that are the social discourse of boys that age.

Yet these boys were following his lead, taking their cue from him, not slavishly, it's true, but companionably, as if he were first among equals. All of them sported black nylon jackets, and all of them, on their left breasts, wore a patch--a swollen red heart. Did they call themselves the Scarlet Hearts? I wondered. Dragon Hearts? Bleeding Hearts?

And I reconstructed the past, the red-lipped boy new in town, but even as the others are targeting him he manages to get them alone one by one, isolating them, convincing them somehow to let him proceed--perhaps by painting it as a tough guy ritual where he comes from--and then kissing them on their bare chests just above their hearts, planting those thick red lips at the source of their life's blood, drawing out oh-so-softly the warm drops that let him live, and giving them in return a swooning, forbidden pleasure.

One by one the bonds are forged, resistance drowned, until it seems only natural to don patches and blazon their pact--never their truth--to the world.

I used to amuse David with such stories, with my plots and pictures. They were the best thing about me, he told me before he left; he would miss them, but he wanted something more. I never told them to anyone else.

The young woman is returning to her table now, but Mother and Sonny do not skip a beat in their conversation, even as he rises to let her slip into the booth. She almost visibly palls as she settles in, that faint smile of a few minutes ago impossible here. Here the shadows are heavy because of the brilliance of Mother and Sonny, and she fades into those shadows.

How unlike she is that other palely pretty woman I saw last week trying on rabbit fur coats at Jordan's. Ash-blond hair, pale cheeks, lips just barely pink--the ice maiden type, I thought. And indeed I overheard her as she snuggled into a heavy jacket. "I'm never warm enough," she said to the hovering clerk. "I'm always cold. But Jack helps--he keeps me warm." She gestured to the young man nearby, who obediently smiled. "I'll take this one," she said, but as she slipped the jacket off she shivered, as if a sudden draft had whirled around her. Jack immediately stepped over and put his arms around her.

I was lingering near another rack of coats, pretending to browse as I watched their little interchange. I fancied I saw, just for a moment, a shiver pass through Jack's body, as if he had absorbed some iciness from her, or rather--as if he had given up a measure of his own warmth, voluntarily or not I couldn't say.

Certainly it was enough for her. She briskly stepped away and walked with the clerk to the desk to complete her purchase. And certainly, too, Jack wrapped his arms around himself. He was partly turned, so I could not see his face clearly, but I imagined there was just a tinge of blue about his lips. In a moment he would lick his lips and recover and forget all about it, but I wondered--

Was he eternally renewable, the ice maiden's Jack? Would he recover time and again from her sharing, her suction, her theft, his warmth renewed by his hotter blood? Or would she slowly, gradually, gather and dissipate his warmth so that he became like ice, too, so that he would have to find another to warm his bones while she turned to Roger or Tom or Carl, in an ever-expanding field of ice?

I did not think, in any event, that Jack would leave the ice maiden of his own accord. No, until she expended or tired of his

warmth, he would be hers, bound by cold chains impervious to heat, impossible to shatter.

So it would be, too, with the young woman across from me here at Mooney's. Her escapes would always be small, her pleasures stolen. As long as Sonny wanted her by his side, there she would stay, and he would want her at least until the baby was born. After that I could not predict, though I suspected he would want her still, to feed his brazen bloom. The child, of course, would be his, and Mother's.

Lost in my musings, I must have been staring--for suddenly, horribly, I catch the eye of the young woman, who smiles faintly, as she did when she entered the ladies' room, but now she is focused on me. In her eyes I catch some faint appeal--nod to me, affirm me--but I slide my own eyes away as if there is no consciousness behind them of where they are lighting. I want no part of her.

I am fearful, suddenly, or impatient, and I gather my possessions, throw money on the table, and leave Mooney's quickly, leaving Mother and Sonny to their mutual admiration and the rest of the late night diners to their hungers, hopes, and fears. I should stop this, I know, stop yearning over those who take their fill of others. I have had my share of men, and of women, too, but I could not hold them; I could not give what they wanted, nor take what I wanted. It is not in me, what binds Mother and Sonny, and the red-lipped boy, and the ice maiden.

The wind tears at me harshly as I exit into the cold fall night, and I brush angrily at the cold saltiness that dims my eyes. I get in the car and turn the key, staring into the windows at Mooney's. I cannot see Mother and Sonny from here, but I see other lives in the warm yellow light, dreamlike, wordless, bored and tired and hopeful and sluggish and smiling and ready to be on the road, headed for another day.

For a moment I watch hungrily, and then I look away and shift into reverse.

PW



Also known as suspense author "William Beechcroft," Bill Hallstead began his book-writing career as "Franklin W. Dickson," author of the 31st book in the famous Hardy Boys series. "There never was a Franklin W. Dickson," Bill Reveals. "That was the pen name assigned to every one of the many writers who have turned out the series on the apparently immortal Frank and Joe Hardy." Since then Bill has had many suspense/mystery novels published under the "Beechcroft" pen name including Pursuit of Fear, Secret Kills, and The Rebuilt Man, just to name a few. His work has also appeared in many magazines and anthologies including Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine and Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine.

No Cabs Run After Midnight

*All Hugh wanted was a hot bath
and some food. What he got was adventure.*

BY WILLIAM BEEHCROFT

Illustrated by Bob E. Hobbs

NEVER IN HIS LIFE HAD HUGH WAYCROSS BEEN so happy to arrive at a hotel. Because of some equipment malfunction, his flight had taken off from Pittsburgh International an hour and a half late. Then a passenger's seizure had diverted the jet to an emergency landing at Roanoke Municipal. That had eaten up two more hours. A landing delay because of fog at this end had cost another hour. His suitcase had been last out of the chute at Capital City Airport. Then he'd had trouble finding a cab.

The trip had been a nightmare, but now the beckoning marquee of the Capital Hotel calmed his jittering nerves. The seemingly endless trek was over. After a good night's sleep, he would be set for his mid-morning appointment with the stationery buyer for the Finletter Department Store chain.

The taxi pulled beneath the hotel's portico. Hugh paid the near-exorbitant \$25 fare. Then in relief at finally having arrived, he added a \$5 tip.

"Thanks, boss," the driver said over his shoulder. "Have a nice evening." The taxi zoomed off into the night.

No doorman? The last time Hugh had stayed here, the hotel doorman, dressed in some sort of turbaned Gurkha rig, had been as impressive as the hotel.

He picked up his suitcase, heavy with writing paper samples--and nearly sprained his wrist yanking at the bigentrance door. Locked, for God's sake! He banged on the glass. Inside, the desk clerk looked his way, nodded, then trotted to the door with a key.

"I know it's late," Hugh grumbled as he followed the skinny night clerk back to the registration counter, "but since when does a hotel lock up at midnight? Where's your doorman?"

The blank-faced clerk--not more than a kid, Hugh thought--shrugged. "Doorman was hurt in a drive-by shooting last Friday. We haven't got a new one yet."

"So you lock the place up?"

"When I'm alone, man, yeah."

"Well, man, how about checking on a reservation for Waycross?"

The clerk twitched a swath of cornsilk hair out of his eyes. "Sorry, we're full up. The Southeastern Civil Engineers Convention."

"What's that got to do with a reservation I made two weeks ago?" This kid looked like he wouldn't know which end was up on a bottle of pop. "Check your records."

The clerk shrugged and twitched, a tic Hugh found annoying.

"Come on," he said. "Check your damned records."

"Won't do any good, man."

Hugh felt his temper rising and fought to control it. "Just check your reservations, kid."

The clerk didn't like that. He flicked up a pale eyebrow, but did begin to tap the keys of his computer terminal. "Won't do any good," he muttered again. "Yeah, here it is. Waycross, Hugh D. A single for tonight."

Hugh sighed in relief. "See, I told you I had--"

Without looking up, the clerk continued to read. "Hold until six P.M."

"What do you mean, 'hold until six'? I've been here more than once after six and I always got a room."

"We hold reserved rooms until six P.M., then let 'em go as needed. You shoulda called if you were going to be late, guaranteed the room."

"Dammit, kid, I was thirty-five thousand feet over Greensboro when I realized I was going to be late!" He could see this wasn't getting him anywhere. He forced himself to simmer down and try another tack. "Look, I'll make it worth your while. I know hotels always have a room or two in reserve. What about a twenty for your courtesy, know what I mean?"

"You can offer a hundred on the side, pops, it won't build a room where we don't have one."

Pops! Hugh was almost overwhelmed by an impulse to leap over the counter and throttle this stubborn, peach-fuzzed little bastard. Through clenched teeth he said, "I've had one hell of a day, sonny. One more dumb comment out of you, and I don't think I can be responsible for any--"

"Okay, okay! Hang on. There's another hotel just down the street. Not the Ritz, but, uh, adequate. They may have a room. Lemme give them a call."

Not the best solution, but at 12:15 A.M., and pretty well beat, Hugh was ready to take anything passable. Still grim-faced, he nodded. "I'll appreciate that."

The clerk tapped in the number, explained the situation, then grinned at Hugh. "Just like that," he said. "The Hotel Palmetto's got a double you can have."

Well, at last. "Look, I'm sorry for the harsh words. For a time there, I thought I was in a real bind. Call me a taxi, will you?"

The clerk shrugged. "Sorry." He twitched the descending hair out of his eyes again. "No cabs run after midnight."





"You're kidding."

"Nope, not after five taxi hold-ups last month with two drivers shot in the head. You're going to have to hoof it."

"Walk there? How far is it?"

"Seven blocks south."

"Welcome to Capital City," Hugh muttered. He picked up his suitcase. "You going to let me out of this sad excuse for a hotel?"

"Sure thing," the clerk said, and he followed Hugh back to the entrance.

On the sidewalk in front of the hotel, Hugh paused. Hell of a situation, but he grudgingly admitted it wasn't really the clerk's fault. The kid was right, he should have called from Roanoke. He'd known then that he was going to get here after six. Well, okay, salesman, here you are at 12:25 A.M., out on the street facing a seven-block walk. He'd hoofed it a lot further than that on a routine sales day.

Hugh Waycross, age 55, five-foot-eight and just a tad overweight, carrying a suitcase weighing thirty pounds, peered south. Seven long--and now that he was about to set out--unusually dark blocks. This was once a street of specialty shops, but no doubt the glittery Midtown Mall over to the west had put them out of business. Now it was a street in limbo, awaiting either a developer's renewal investment or the slam of a wrecking ball.

Straining his ears, Hugh could make out the distant surflike wash of traffic a lot of blocks to the west. But this street was dead silent, not a car on it. The single streetlight at each intersection glowed sickly orange through a clammy mist that seemed to seep out of the asphalt. A lot of blocks distant, Hugh could just make out a brighter glow. That had to be the Palmetto, and except for the Capital Hotel here, it seemed to be the only sign of life on the entire street.

He stepped out, his leather soles grating on the sidewalk's gritty concrete. My God, he thought, this is eerie, this dead silent, abandoned street in a city where cab drivers refused to work after midnight. If a cabbie in his steel cocoon was afraid to be out here now, what am I doing on foot, burdened down with a suitcase that already seems to have put on another ten pounds?

At the corner, Hugh paused. Half a block, and all right so far. Hadn't seen or heard a thing. He strode through the streetlight's orange glow and into the darkness of the next block.

He passed one boarded-up storefront after another, their plywood sheathing defaced with graffiti scrawls. That wasn't as unnerving as the spaces between the buildings, narrow passageways leading to God-knew-what back there in the opaque blackness. He edged close to the trash-strewn gutter. No sense in making it easy for--

A hand had grabbed his elbow. Hugh whirled around.

The shadowy figure was taller than he and smelled foul. Like soiled diapers.

"Buck. Y'gotta buck? Gimme a buck." Bursts of breath sour as curdled milk seared Hugh's nostrils. The smelly, tottering apparition wore an overcoat long gone to rags and a decrepit, filthy fishing hat. Pull out my wallet, Hugh thought, and then what?

"Sorry," he muttered. He wrenched his arm free and shoved on.

"You son bitch!" the derelict shouted. "Cheap son bitch!" His raspy cry echoed off the crumbling storefronts, then the silence was deeper than before.

God, the guy had padded up behind Hugh without a sound. How many more aggressive bums lurked in the shadows of the blocks ahead?

Now he heard soft scrapings, muffled grunts, the rasp of asthmatic breathing. Or thought he did. He hurried across the next intersection, and he--

The crash-tinkle of shattering glass froze him in mid-stride.

He heard rapid footfalls. Receding, he hoped. A smash-and-grab. Somebody must have busted in the window of a still-solvent store up the side street.

He stood frozen, hoping to hear the bell-jangle of a burglar alarm.

Nothing.

Maybe it was a silent alarm, and a police unit was on the way. He prayed that he would hear a distant siren. But he heard nothing. As if his ears had gone dead. Then here they came again, the little scrapings and sibilant breathing. He shook his head. The eerie sounds stopped. Or were never there.

He couldn't stand here all night. Hugh stepped out once more, trying to walk silently, an impossibility with his leather soles.

This was stupid, walking alone on this run-downstreet in a city where cab drivers fled at the stroke of midnight. But what choice did he have?

Could have called from the hotel for a ride in a police car, you dummy. Now he'd thought of that, now that he was halfway between the two hotels.

Or maybe break a storefront window himself, hoping it was hooked to a monitored alarm? Was he kidding? All the storefronts on this miserable street had been boarded up. No crash and tinkle here, he realized. Just a futile thump in the dark.

Then it struck him that there was one desperate move he could make. Instead of pushing along the sidewalk near the building line and cringing at every rat scabble, he could walk down the middle of the street. He doubted that any rum-soaked derelict would stumble all the way out there to bum a buck.

Straight down the center of the pavement walked Hugh Waycross, feeling he had at least taken one small precaution; and suddenly wondering if anyone would care if he were found at dawn, a bloodied huddle on the pot-holed asphalt. He had been a widower for fifteen years. His son was one of the hundreds of "producers" two thousand miles away in L.A., now and then turning out a second-rate commercial or maybe even a porn flick. And now and then sending Hugh a Christmas card. Would Hugh Junior care that his old man had died in the bleak small hours on a filthy street in a decaying city? Would he even hear about it?

Two blocks to go. The mist had thickened, choking the glow of the streetlights. He could still make out the yellow aura of the Hotel Flamingo's marquee through the milky swirls, a luminous—

Two silhouettes suddenly materialized between him and the marquee's luminescence. Two figures not twenty feet away. He stopped. Jesus.

They drifted toward him.

"Morning, man," the taller one rasped. "What you got in the bag?"

Now they were only a threatening yard away, two teenagers, he judged. The tall one, in jeans and a scruffy leather jacket, had an acne-ravaged rat face framed by greasy hair that fell to his shoulders. The shorter kid wore an old army field jacket. His head was shaved, giving him a moon-faced look. All this Hugh noted in one panicky glance, then his attention was riveted on the switchblade the tall one tossed hand to hand. And the revolver the shorter one pointed straight at Hugh's stomach.

"Lessee what's in the bag, man," the tall kid prompted.

Sweat pouring down his face, Hugh stood frozen. This was the American nightmare. Held at gunpoint by young punks without a conscience. Hugh had often wondered how he would react. He still didn't know.

The shorter punk motioned with the pistol. "Set it down. We'll have your watch and wallet, too, dad."

Hugh bent down to place the suitcase on the pavement. His whole body trembled. Even if he handed over everything they wanted, he knew that too many of these cocky, young muggers

killed their victims anyway. The suitcase with his samples, the tools of his life's work, would be pawed through and no doubt tossed aside, just more trash on this hellish street.

And Hugh was gripped with sudden rage. He grabbed the suitcase handle with both hands and swung the heavy leather case upwards and sideways in a slashing arc. Its corner, concentrating the impact of thirty pounds of clothing and paper samples, caught the shorter punk on the side of the head. He staggered backwards. The gun flew out of his hand and clattered toward the gutter.

Then the suitcase smashed the tall mugger full in the face. Hugh was sure he heard teeth crunch as the pimply youth fell sideways, fought to regain his balance, and lurched off to Hugh's left.

And Hugh ran. Like a rabbit from a hunter's rifle. A hundred yards to go when the first shot banged behind him. Pavement chips stung his ankles. Close. Hugh felt totally exposed. In sudden reflex, he grabbed the suitcase handle with both hands and swung the heavy bag over his head to thud against his back. It was an imperfect shield that threw him off balance and made running even more awkward.

He knew he looked ridiculous, elbows above his head, suitcase thumping his shoulder blades, legs scrabbling for balance. A bullet cracked past his right ear, and whined off the pavement far ahead of him. Fifty feet to go. Another shot. This one hit him somewhere. He felt the impact but no pain. Could this huge rush of adrenaline deaden pain?

Then he crashed into the hotel's brass-and-glass door. Inside, a chalk-faced man fumbled with the lock. Hugh heard footsteps pounding behind him. The door swung wide. He fell into the lobby. The suitcase slammed the back of his head and slid away on the tiled floor. He heard the clerk hurriedly re-lock the heavy door.

He was afraid to move because that would tell him where the wound was.

"Goddam muggers!" The chubby, middle-aged night clerk squatted beside him, his caterpillar moustache framing the top of his red-lipped mouth. "You okay, buddy? I heard 'em fire at least three shots, maybe more. You okay?"

Hugh sat up and told himself to expect the worst. But he found not a mark on him. A damned miracle.

The night clerk straightened and retrieved Hugh's suitcase. "Hey, lookee here!"

Hugh clambered to his feet and took a look. In the middle of one side of the suitcase was a neat round hole the diameter of a pencil. He wondered what Finletter's buyer was going to think of samples perforated by a bullet? To hell with what she would think. It was her city that had done it.

"You're Waycross, right?" the clerk said. Hugh nodded. The clerk strode around the end of the registration counter and selected a key from the honeycomb of key boxes. "You'll be in three-oh-four, and, uh, welcome to Capital City."

He watched Waycross walk into the elevator. After the door slid shut, the clerk picked up his phone and stabbed in a number.

"That you, Sandy?" He pictured his counterpart up there at the Capital Hotel twitching back his damned lock of hair.

"Yeah, it's me."

"He made it."

"You're kidding!"

"Nope. Not like the guy last week. This one got here. So, Sandy, buddy," he said with almost lip-smacking relish, "looks like this time you owe me a fifty."

He heard the Capital Hotel clerk sigh. "Yeah, well, okay. Win some lose some, right? Win some, lose some."

PW



Ardath Mayhar has written many books under her real name as well as under the pen names John Killdeer and Frank Cannon. Some of her titles include: Hunters of the Plains, Blood Kin, The Island in the Lake, Towers of the Earth, The Untamed and Wilderness Rendezvous. Her work has also appeared in numerous magazines and anthologies including New Mystery, Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, Asimov's, and Amazing Stories.

Cage of the Heart

BY ARDATH MAYHAR

Illustrated by Keith Minnion

Memories of war can last forever.

I SHRANK IN UPON MYSELF, HUDDLED IN A CORNER OF THE BAMBOO CAGE. The rods that formed it were a black web against the dim light from the low doorway of the hut; they offered no concealment to any prisoner kept there.

I could hear Dien's bootheels tapping down the walkway between the huts as he came after me. Again. He always came at twilight.

I throbbed with remembered as well as anticipated pain. I felt as if I were some injured organ cowering inside the ribcage of a tortured creature, helpless to prevent its coming agony and anxious to plead with the host-body, "Tell them what they want to know! Give them anything they want! Just get us out of this!"

I knew that was useless. Dien wanted nothing that I could give him, for I was only a lowly infantryman. I didn't know anything of value to his superiors, and he knew it. Dien enjoyed giving pain.

I shivered harder and harder. If I had possessed some honorable reason for my suffering...some heroic stance that justified enduring the torture...it might have helped, just a bit. And then it might not.

I was shivering so hard that the rattle of my cage was drowning out the tap of the approaching boots. My hands clenched, and my jaws locked together until my teeth ached.

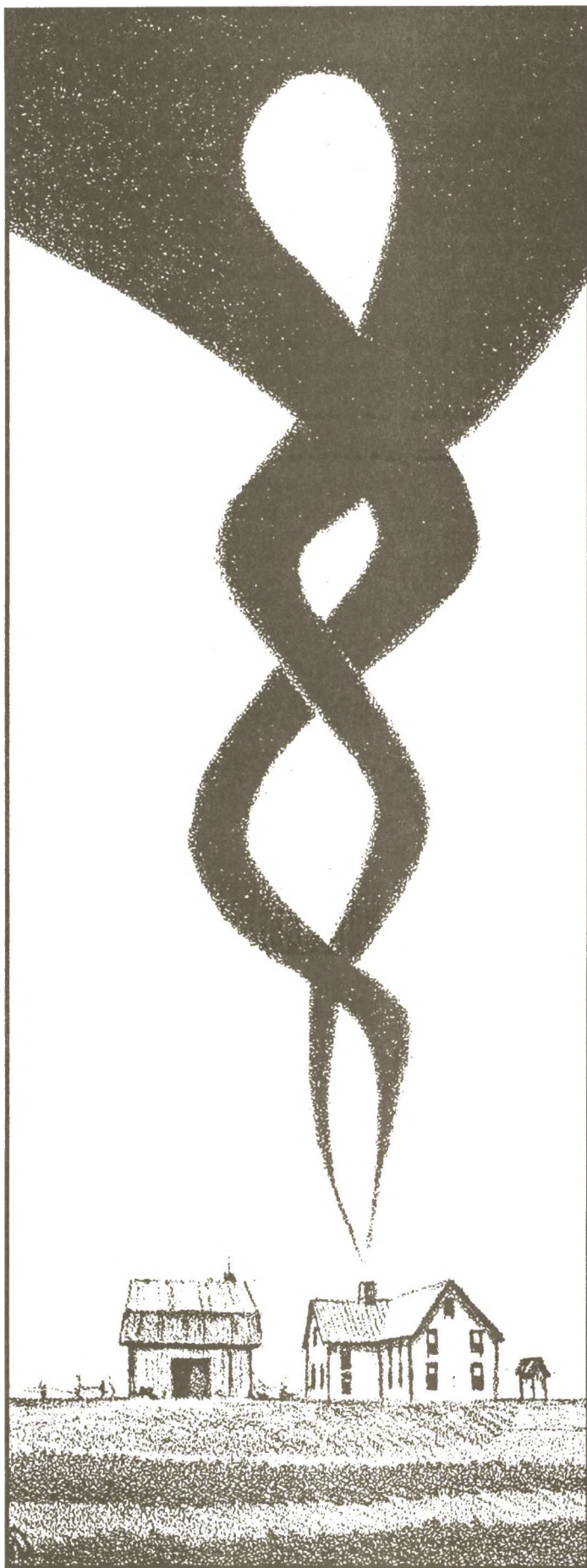
I woke with a jerk, as always, and stared blankly at the pattern of light and shadow on the bedroom ceiling. I was still shaking, and Dorothy was beginning to sigh, preparatory to waking.

Sliding from the bed, I padded toward the bathroom. On nights like this, when the shaking started, I tried to leave our bedroom before I woke her. It frightened her as much as it did me, and that bothered me almost as badly as the recurring dream. I slept many a night on the couch in my study, after a dreaming encounter with Dien.

I stood over the toilet, refusing to look down. Dien had done things to my plumbing that still had not healed and probably never would. There was often blood in my urine. I stole a glance and saw that it was back again. Fumbling in the medicine cabinet, I got out my medication and took two tablets. My hand was shaking, and I gripped the edge of the basin to steady myself. What a wreck that devil had made of me.

My hands, revealed in the harsh light of the bathroom fixture, were sickening. Scarred, crooked-fingered, their nails still misshapen from the insertion of bamboo splinters, they had been hard to force to learn to type again. It had required long and painful effort, and the sight of those gnarled claws still made me sick and angry.

I had been no model soldier, showing great endurance and fortitude. I remembered that with shame. I had wept and shrieked,



along with the rest of my hapless fellows who had the misfortune to fall into the hands of Dien. Most of the others had died. I had missed that death by minutes, for the chopper had come as I was being marched out to the killing place.

I gulped air and stood erect. If I'd been a coward, so had every other man in the compound. Nobody could out-tough Dien, and nobody had tried to for very long. And now I was free. At home. My articles were selling even faster than they had before I went to 'Nam, and I was writing better than ever.

I'd be damned before I would go to a shrink for help. That would be the final and shameful cowardice. A cop-out that I wouldn't let myself consider. I had always solved my own problems, except for the problem of Dien, and there had been no possibility of dealing with him. When you are starved and beaten and bleeding, it's all you can do to hold yourself together enough to keep going.

Once I lay down on the couch, I stopped shaking. Usually I slept pretty soundly after one of those dreams...I seemed to have only one really terrible Dien dream per night allotted to me. Once I finished with it, I could sleep, though I didn't go back to bed for fear of waking Dorothy.

My next article was scheduled to cover one of those little towns north of Houston. I was doing a series of pieces on good places to live, if you worked in the city but didn't want to live there. Cane Creek had a neat downtown area, where storefronts had been modernized. There was a nice selection of shops. The merchants were cheerful and friendly.

I forgot the night before, for I loved my work and put everything I had into it. My articles were popular, I think, because I never scamped research or painstaking effort in preparing them.

I'd just come out of the bank and was moving toward the drugstore when I saw Dien.

He was walking along, totally assured, leading a small dog that looked like some rare and expensive breed to me. A short dark woman was beside him, and I also recognized her. Her photograph had been on his desk, each time I had been dragged into his office at twilight. The Chamber of Horrors had adjoined his office, and her face, as well as his, was etched into my memory.

I stopped in my tracks, so quickly that an elderly woman almost walked into me. I smiled absently as I apologized, but all my real attention was focused on the pair as they entered the bank I had just left.

Once I was in the drugstore, I asked the druggist about the two Vietnamese. "I was in 'Nam, and I could recognize a Viet anyplace," I explained.

"Ah. Yes. The Nguyens. A hard-working couple, those two. We wondered a bit when they first came, if they would fit in, if it was going to work having them here, but they have really made a place for themselves in Cane Creek. Mr. Drake, they are the thriftiest people you ever saw. In five years, they have paid for a big farm and found markets for their produce. Why, they're well-to-do, now. We're really proud of them."

"So they live here? Interesting. I may put something into my article about this being a very open-minded community, as well as its other virtues," I said. "Where do they live, do you know?"

"Oh, yes. Their farm is about five miles out of town on the farm-to-market road running northeast from the bypass. They have hired a bunch of their relatives that made it over to this country, and those people grow more vegetables on that acreage than you would believe. The others never come to town, so I don't know them personally, but I expect they are as good as the Nguyens."

I felt a chill along my backbone. I had seen how Dien enslaved the local Vietnamese when he ran the prisoner camp. Unless he had changed a whole hell of a lot, he was working a

number of boat people as slaves. I would have bet anything on that.

I took my leave of Mr. Simpson rather hurriedly. I wanted to get to that farm while the Diens were in town. They hadn't come out, so I knew they were still in the bank.

I found the farm without too much trouble. A stand of pines almost hid the house from the road, and I drove past the neat driveway to a track that led into a field through a thick stand of bushes. I parked, leaving the car hidden, and scouted back through the pines until I could see the house and a good bit of the cleared land behind it.

The soil had been turned for a second planting, though it seemed late to me to be planting anything. Summer just about burns crops to cinders in this latitude. Small shapes bent above the rows. They weren't wearing coolie-hats, but they had that stoop-backed posture I had come to know in South-east Asia. They looked defeated, moving doggedly about their work, heads down. Hopeless.

Dien! Damn him!

I went home and wrote my article, though I kept thinking about Dien all the while. It was a good article, too, and I'm glad, for it's probably the last one I'll ever do.

I have learned a lot of things since I got out of his dirty hands. Not only about fear and how to deal with it, but also about hatred. I could deal with him now, on terms that would give him a taste of the terror he had spent his life inflicting on others.

I hated a lot of the things it would entail. Leaving Dorothy on her own. Abandoning my work. But I had never thought I would have the chance to square things with Dien, and I could no more neglect this opportunity than I could erase the scars from my mind and body. I knew I must attend to this monster as soon as I could manage it.

Tonight, if possible, I will do it. I am lying on my couch in the study. Dorothy is sound asleep in the bedroom. I can feel strength inside myself...I am no longer starved and abused almost to the point of death. Strange as it may seem, I am not even bitter, now that the time has come. I feel like an avenging angel, of sorts.

All day, I have been thinking about the way in which to attack Dien. I know him too well to think that he is not properly guarded; some of those slaves of his will be patrolling his land. I could never reach him physically. So I will get to him non-physically.

Closing my eyes, I retrace the route to his house, crossing the miles separating Cane Creek from my southeast Houston suburb. A dark tendril of hatred is reaching, reaching toward him, and I somehow feel that he is tugging it toward his sleeping body as strongly as I am pushing it.

Does something inside him feel guilty? Is some part of his consciousness—or his subconscious—needing expiation for the horrors he committed in the name of war?

I am relaxed, now. My body is without pain for the first time in years. I am a black focus of rage, all aimed at Dien, asleep in that distant farmhouse. I know what is happening, but my mind is no longer controlling it. The hatred has taken charge, and I follow it with some strange disembodied vision, anxious to know what will happen.

I can see the house from above, like a negative of an aerial photograph. I see through the roof, into the room where he sleeps alone in a narrow bed.

The boil of rage that carries me along is focused into a single purpose now. We plummet through the intangible roof, into that room. We hang above the bed, looking down on the sleeping face of Dien.

He moans and moves uneasily in his sleep. That smooth face is furrowed with a deep frown. Can he feel this black fog hanging over him? I hope so.

There is no hurry, now. We are here, and there is time to appreciate the subtle cruelty of the hatred to which I have given birth. It is going to infect his dreams...and then what? I am anxious to know the depth of my own inhumanity. Am I as cruel, in my own way, as Dien?

Slowly, the cloud condenses, moving downward toward the man on the bed. We sink through his ribcage as easily as we did through the roof of the house. It is dark, there, but his organs are outlined in glimmering nimbuses of phosphorescence. The lungs pump slowly; arteries surge with the burden of his blood.

That heart is trapped within the cage of his ribs, just as I was trapped for so many months in that bamboo cage at Quang-yi. It speeds its beating, as if feeling the approach of danger. We surround it gently, not touching it, at first. We let it feel the chill of our presence.

Then we begin to squeeze.

Removed as I am, I feel the anguish that envelops my physical body, far away on the couch in my study. My own heart is struggling, crushed by pressures too great to bear. For an instant, my hatred lapses into fear.

So that is the price? Then it is a price that I must pay.

The rage swells again, pressing upon Dien's laboring heart, crushing it slowly and with infinite deliberateness. All that pain! I know too well how it feels, for in my distant body my own heart is dying.

Now I add a conscious effort to that of my black rage. We squeeze desperately, for I must finish Dien before I am overtaken by my own death. There is nothing in all the universe except pain. Such agony! It makes what I endured in that bamboo cage seem trivial.

Dien knows he is dying, but he cannot wake. He is terrified, but he can't cry out or move.

Hatred and death have locked us into a closer embrace than love could ever manage to do. I see into him, just as his sleeping mind sees into me. We understand each other fully, at this final moment, and neither of us is as good or as evil as we thought.

I manage a final convulsion of effort. It is enough.

From THE HOUSTON CHRONICLE, July 10, 1986

SLEEP-DEATH CLAIMS VIETNAMESE REFUGEE

HOUSTON — Nguyen Tran Dinh, 47, of Cane Creek has become the tenth in a series of unexplained deaths among members of the Vietnamese refugee groups living in the U.S. Coroner Stan Sublett of Cane Creek, pronounced him dead at his home at six A.M., July 9, after he was found by his wife, Suyin, when she went in to awaken him.

Though Nguyen had complained of nightmares for some time, he had no known physical ailment. Heart failure is listed as the cause of death.

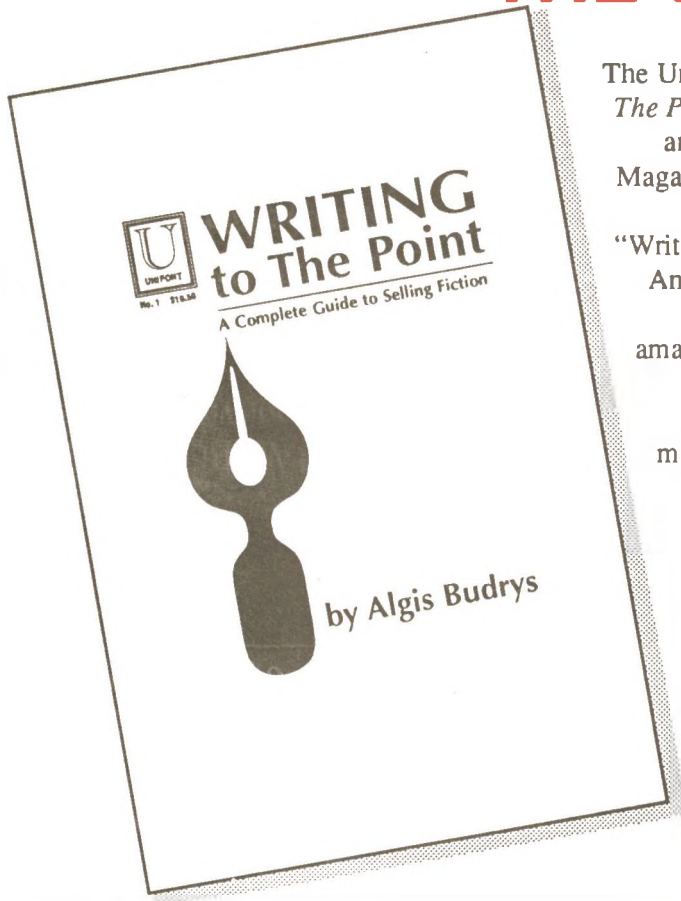
He is survived by his wife, Suyin, two sons, Tran and Ngo, and his parents, who remain in Vietnam. Private interment will take place in Cane Creek later this week, under the auspices of Sublett Funeral Home.

Obituary Column, THE HOUSTON POST, July 11, 1986

DRAKE, Harold Larkin — Interment will be at ten o'clock A.M. today at Drake Cemetery in Shelby County, Texas, for Harold L. Drake, formerly of 112 Live Oak Street, Deer Park. Mr. Drake is survived by his widow, Dorothy Elliston Drake, two brothers, Jonathan and Samuel, four nephews and two nieces. In lieu of flowers, the family requests donations to the Heart Fund.

PW

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Bruce Boston is one of the hippest writers around. His books, stories and poetry have a flare that makes his work a joy to read. His most recent book, Stained Glass Rain, received much critical acclaim. His short works have appeared in Asimov's, Science Fiction Age, Dragon Magazine, and many others. His list of awards is also impressive; including the Pushcart Prize and Rhysling Award. We hope to see his work within the pages of PW again very soon.

The Lair of the

What keeps love alive?

BEAST

BY BRUCE BOSTON

Illustrated by Keith Minnion

“**Y**OU BASTARD!”

She spit the words at him--affectedly, he thought--and stubbed out her cigarette in the ash-tray, the cigarette she had lit only seconds before. It broke at the filter and remained smoldering foully. She tore out of the chair, one perfect leg a lever, the other springing beneath her, her tailored skirt falling an inch or two down her thighs as she paced across the room.

“Marta...please.”

The note of pleading was in his voice that he had hoped wouldn't be there. What could he tell her? Don't make a scene. After all, he was leaving her. Didn't it deserve a scene?

Thirty stories below them, an amorphous beast slithered across the sidewalk and began to ooze up the sheer wall of the building. It was constantly changing shape, something

like a gargantuan amoeba. Although it remained invisible to the naked eye, several pedestrians, sensing the emanations from its presence, abruptly changed their paths and shied away. One man paused and lingered for a moment, inexplicably drawn to the monstrosity.

She wouldn't answer him.

She stood at the window, arms folded, her back turned, staring at the city below. From where he was sitting all he could see beyond her was open sky, pale, with a few drifts of static gray clouds. The surrounding brightness transformed her figure to a silhouette. It looked rigid and unbending to him. Objectively he knew that she was beautiful, but he could no longer perceive it. He realized that other men desired her, but he was aware only of the edges of her body, not its curves. Sharp lines and hard angles. The single crease like a gash across her forehead when she worried. The taut rectangle of her lips when they were fighting and she screamed at him.

Inch by inch, pseudopod by pseudopod, the creature continued to wend its way upward. On the twenty-third floor, T. K. Johnson, district sales manager for the eight Western states, felt a flush spreading across his forehead and cheeks. He clicked the air conditioner a notch higher and hastily wiped the sweat from his brow. His secretary, Ms. Lang—severe, rotund, more than a decade his senior—hunched industriously over her dictation pad, all at once seemed irresistible to him. Before he could act upon the notion and its subsequent impulse, before Ms. Lang could look up and see the unabashed lust brimming in his eyes, the feeling thankfully vanished as abruptly as it had possessed him.

Although her back remained turned, she began to speak. It was a moment before he could bring himself to fasten upon the

sentences and perceive them as intelligible sound.

"...to expect this. You made my life, all of it. Ten years devoted to you, catering to you and your needs. And now you can walk away as if it were some kind of game, as if none of it ever really happened."

"We'll work out a fair settlement."

Those weren't his words. They were playing out the clichés, he thought, because there was nothing else for them to say. Nothing that could really be said at all.

"You and your damn money!" Her tone was bitter, totally condemning. "You think you can solve everything with it, don't you?" She turned to face him. Though her tears hadn't begun to fall, he could see them hanging at the corners of her eyes. "And what about Katrina? She's your daughter too, you know. What are you planning to tell her? Or is that up to me?"

He couldn't say anything. He wouldn't. Fingers spread, his hand made a vague gesture by the side of his head.

"It's different for men, isn't it? It's so easy. You've never really understood what children and a family are all about. You don't have the slightest clue. I'm not even sure you understand what love is about."

Yes, he was wrong. Completely wrong. He would grant her that. Still, what was he supposed to do? If this went on any longer the way it had been for the last few years, there would be nothing left of him at all. It wasn't that he didn't love her, though sometimes it was hard to find the love through all the complications, the tedium and differences. If he had made her life, as she claimed, he had done so by chance, without aim or calculation. If he had made her life, he had failed miserably to make a life that could coincide with his own.

Straight through the window it came, straight through the



supposedly impermeable glass as if there were no glass there to stop it...to ooze over the sill and plop noiselessly onto the carpet...to begin edging its inevitable way along the floor.

She came across the room, and on the way he could see her face changing, something in her breaking loose. Her hatred? Her will? She fell to her knees before his chair. The tailored skirt edged up her thighs. Tears fell slowly, running down her cheeks in soft, graceful curves. He wanted her.

"Please," she said, "can't we start again!"

"No," he tried reaching out to touch her hair, *feeling the amorphous tentacles of the beast winding up his pant leg, through his shirt, through his flesh, inhabiting the hollow chambers of his chest, closing like a tenuous vise about the ventricles and aorta of his never-constant heart.*

He had been here more than once before.

PW

**FUTURE PERFECT:
A PLEA FOR MASS ILLUSION
by Bruce Boston**

Welcome your painful sorrow to a bright tomorrow
where all modes of strangeness have been banished,
where the crumbling infrastructures are beautiful,
the glowering masses are hologenically beautiful,
where even the daily terrors that scream across
the airwaves and sanquinely stain the headlines
are abstracts for rants of beautiful interpretation.

Somnambulating in a staid river racing light,
chromatic evasions rapidly discharging across
our saturated retinas, our rendered imaginations,
we can savor all of our pleasures by the screenful,
famous brand pleasures we have learned to trust:
tamper proof, free of fat, one-third fewer neurons,
digitally remastered from their hairy antecedents.

Once we collapse the tenements of hateful passion
and detonate the circuitous tunnels of the heart
into a flat darkness no citizen need ever traverse,
once we buckle our belts and blindside history,
once we garrote the conscience we might all inhabit.
Every one of us can be taught to maintain fashion.

So surrender your strangeness to a bright tomorrow
where painful sorrow is barely a chatter in the static,
where beauty travels from the mind of the controller.
Rush past the cracked palm, shun the jaundiced eye,
leave your thought and reservations on the doorstep.
Sit close by our silkclad sides and tell us you love us.
Come and kiss the strawberry blisters from our lips.

NAPA VALLEY, 2043

Eggplant-colored tentacles, the last thought

The final two-leg had before his head
Popped off and rolled into a corner, there
Between the stone walls lined with odd-shaped racks.

They did not know an eggplant from a grape,
Nor know that tentacles were what men called
Their iron-strong extremities that crushed
The life from every human in the vale:

Vitners, tourists too, this planet's mites.
First this verdant indentation, then the world!
But now, let us take their valuables,
This odd coinage in the racks they tried to save.

But alcohol turned to poison in their veins.
We have been tricked! Ammonia... But too late.
The year that Napa died and saved the world,
All lands agree, was truly a good year.
--Susan Spilecki

FREE FALL

Large bodies
attract small bodies
like large dreams
seduce small dreamers
so it comes as no surprise
that, engines dead,
I am out of control,
careening towards
the surface of that planet
just as it should
not be a shock
that I am exploring
this remote corner
of the universe
in the first place,
the unknown
sucking up my feeble knowledge
with the persuasive straw
of explanation
and what is death anyhow
but one more vast, beguiling unknown
about to slap its truth
fiercely, brutally,
into the ignorance
of the last of my life.
--John Grey

REVIEWS

Big Books:

MYSTERY:

HARD CURRENCY by Stuart M. Kaminsky Fawcett Columbine--\$20.00

I love novels that make full use of the adage "Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they're not out to get you." To have characters who are aware of such alarming facts and yet are still able to turn them to their own full advantage makes the reading that much more enjoyable, our heroes all the more sympathetic.

Of course this was a mainstay of all the Russian vs. American espionage novels from the past several decades; but since the fall of communism a new sub-genre of fiction has quickly become established featuring the poor working cops and spies of the former Soviet Union who now wander lost in a world of political chaos, doing their best to keep a clear eye on their mission while understanding that the changing tides of their homeland may alter their allegiances at any moment.

In Stuart M. Kaminsky's Hard Currency we are provided with a relatively short, extremely tightly-woven tale of police bureaucracy, politico games playing, and savage serial killings. Detective Porfieri Rostnikov and his assistant, Elena Timofeyeva, are dispatched to Cuba by their superiors in order to investigate a woman's murder allegedly committed by a former Russian advisor who now rots in jail, all but convicted by the Cubans. With a bumbling KGB agent also in on the mission, Rostnikov must work through a mystery that seems on one level quite straight-forward, while at the same it is also full of red herrings and transparent clues. He knows well enough that there are more than two sides to every issue, and he must make difficult choices on exactly what evidence his superiors want him to find, and what he actually uncovers during the investigation.

However, a sub-plot--or more accurately a *co-plot*--also being spun herein is one that involves over forty sexual mutilation murders occurring in under five years on the streets of Moscow. Inspector Emil Karpo--called "the Vampire" due to his obsessive, almost inhuman nature--hunts for a madman who he feels a certain understanding (and repulsion) for, a murderer tormented by his own unnatural 'demons'

of the soul. Karpo is even willing to use his own young assistant Sasha Tkach as the bait for the killer, who insists on being called Tahpor, the Ax, although Karpo refuses to think of him as anything other than 'Case 341.' Using hints of the psychological byplay that made Silence of the Lambs such a success, Kaminsky keeps the analyses at a minimum while maximizing the mundane 'humanity' of a man urged to destroy by his own whispering, uncaged predatory nature.

Both Rostnikov and Karpo deal with interfering government forces and must solve the cases despite outside pressures that more often than not demand the cases to remain unsolved. Here are two men driven by the idea of justice in a world grown even more lawless since the fall of Lenin's statue and the end of the Cold War. It is a fascinating view of police officers' lives in a country virtually quaking with political upheaval, where even the most solid truth trembles, shudders, and shifts from day to day depending on which leader has signed a pact with which foreign power.

Take your hard-earned hard currency and spend it on this novel, wherein you'll find a clever mystery, gripping twists, and moral tangles that will have you questioning exactly where the law ends, justice begins, and the bureaucracy draws its own invisible but lethal political lines--possibly right over the toes of its citizens.

THE GANJA COAST by Paul Mann Fawcett Columbine--\$22.50

Substance and style often play a huge part in mystery novels, but only occasionally does setting take on an equal if not greater importance to the story. When the backdrop to the plot becomes a character in itself, the attraction and suspense of the book is multiplied that much more, to the point where every shadow, building, moral code, and social nuance adds new and subtle details to an unfolding panorama. Here in Paul Mann's The Ganja Coast, the life of India itself cannot be separated from her inhabitants: Indians as well as the American dropouts, hippies, and drug dealers who have made the land, for better or worse, their own.

In Bombay, lawyer George Sansi is approached by his former boss, the powerful yet self-serving commissioner of crime branch, Narendra Jamal. For the first time Jamal fears he is losing his status in the government, which now plans to turn the decadent beaches of Goa, "the Ganja Coast," over to corrupt developers who will work the area into an even larger drug-running, lawless region. Jamal's main rival, Rajiv Banerjee, who's title, ironically enough,

is that of 'Minister for Economic Development' will profit the most; Jamal sends Sansi to Goa in a last ditch effort to find evidence against Banerjee in a region without any justice at all, and where Sansi will not even be able to depend on the police force for help.

With his American lover Annie Gennaro--a reporter making her living by trying to change certain indecent practices of India that have lasted thousands of years--the two enter the strange living conditions of the Ganja Coast, where burned-out hippies hold 'Moon Party' orgies on the open beaches. But even the drop-outs are shocked from their drug-induced reverie when a young girl is strangled in their midst and found floating in the waves, yet is officially listed as an accidental victim of drowning. With corruption soaring to anarchic levels, Sansi sets out to bring Banerjee down, and soon discovers even greater evils among the land when he learns that the Westerners are being 'harvested'--killing with drug overdoses in order for their bodies to be sold back to their families at the price of exorbitant payoffs.

Even as Sansi pulls on the threads of corruption and finds himself growing deeper and deeper into the dangers of the Ganja Coast, Annie is relaxing with a young woman, Cora--best friend to the murdered girl's mother--and finds herself coming at the mystery from the opposite end, learning more about the inner workings and squalor of Goa. A complex character herself, Annie is our American archetype in India: always left outside so much but trying desperately to understand the situation. 'Cultural differences' is too often the only answer she gets when she tackles any injustice--especially the 'dowry burnings' of India, where thousands of women each year are burned to death because their fathers cannot afford their dowries. Such true yet unbelievable facts as this pepper the novel with an engaging yet harrowing quality.

Paul Mann's empathy as well as understanding of the seamy, dark side of India is his greatest strength--although Annie often makes judgment calls on the horrors she witnesses, it is Sansi who rises in defense of his homeland, urging her to comprehend the fact that no one who is not born and raised of the country can truly construe its intricacies and contradictions. Perhaps this counts for the author himself, but I somehow doubt it: he'll take you into the grip of the Ganja Coast and let you discover its extraordinary lunacies for yourself.

BY TOM PICCIRILLI

FANTASY & SF:

ARMED MEMORY by Jim Young Tor Books--\$21.95

The end of the twenty-first century has become the age of the microde virus, where socio-politico culture has merged with the hip and artistic fashionable underground to give us a downtown Manhattan lifestyle where the club scene is comprised of anything from Conan to Wonder Woman, Elvis to Madonna, snake-women to werewolves or any other version of a dream body made real.

Soon after arriving in Manhattan, Tim Wandel accidentally meets his long-estranged cousin Johnny Stevens, one of the initial creators of the designer genes microde virus. Taking a corporate job with Johnny, who is now one of the world's richest men, Tim finds himself at the nucleus of a wave of disruption across the earth that may well destroy humanity. A strange and vicious new sub-race called the Hammerheads are spreading terror as they gain a firmer hold on organized crime--now microded into the form of human sharks, they take their orders from the 'great ones' that prowl the ocean floors and seek to wipe out all air-breathing mammals.

Reminiscent of Charles Scheffeld's Proteus series, Jim Young ushers us into a world where born-again creations have begun to clash with their former human brethren. While most of the world is content with wearing the mirror image forms of their rock star idols, there are still those who seek to physicalize some facet of their souls, evil as they might be. Along with robots (and with tongue planted firmly in cheek, it seems Young almost dares us to ask just when was the last time we actually read about 'robots'--later in the book, a submarine called the Capek brings that particular joke full circle), high-tech genetic wizardry, new life forms, and a world on the verge of nuclear war, we're given a combination of offbeat elements and pulled into a stylishly, engaging tale.

However, one slight drawback to the novel is that while the Hammerheads are spoken of in incredibly gruesome terms--worse than either communism or the mafia, more horrifying than all of fascism--and though we even get the chance to see the 'birth' of a man made shark against his will, still they are presented only in the shadowy depths of the sea or dark Manhattan alleyways. In the final chapters we are given a summation of the original Far Eastern triad philosophy/religious orientation of this new breed of mankind, but the concepts are so fresh and chilling that more time given to these themes would have been that much more satisfying.

Small Press:

STAR BONES WEEP THE BLOOD OF ANGELS by Sue Storm Jasmine Sailing/Cyber-Psychos AOD--\$5.00 PO Box 581, Denver CO 80201

An amazing first collection containing seven tales by an author who's fiction is often based in the harsh realities of abuse and violence, Sue Storm takes us on a surreal, sensual ride through all kinds of obsessive purgatories and fantastical hells. Stand out stories such as "Halfbreed", "The Wolf-Girl's Song", and the exceptionally, wonderfully disturbing "The Sorry Childs' Christmas" are as career making cornerstone tales as Robert Bloch's "Yours Truly, Jack the Ripper" and even ascend to that kind of social/human platform of brilliance as Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery."

No single genre is wide enough for the crux of her tales: supernatural horror, fantasy, magical realism or speculative fiction, she works out the laws and parameters of common insanities and habitual nightmares. A deft surgeon of the macabre, she is precise in her skills and practice, sewing together madness, humor, and the chillingly weird, to breathe life into creatures that do more than simply take over our world--they gleefully invite, entice, seduce, and ultimately drag us into theirs.

ROADKILL by Richard Sanford Write Way Publishing--\$18.95 3806 South Fraser, Aurora CO 80014

An offbeat suspense/horror novel that brings together several protagonists to the same stretch of deadly, lonely road just south of Portland, Oregon, Richard Sanford's Roadkill never allows blood and gore to take the place of thoroughly heart-pounding passages of escape and battle with a powerful, mysterious enemy. Here a number of traveling characters--including a

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sojourning professor and his family, a trucker, an unlucky motorist changing a tire, and a semi-fanatical teenage boy who bears most of the guilty brunt of the horrors soon set in motion--come in contact with a strange race of bird-creatures recently broken free from the bowels of the earth by a ragtag group of survivalists drilling through a mountainside. Who will fight, die, or escape the beasts become; the crux of events to follow, with Sanford providing enough fleshing out of his characters so that the reader never knows who might make it to the end of this particularly rocky road. In the terse battle/chase scenes of the last quarter of the novel, all the stops are pulled out in a visual driving-through-hell sequence that is a wild pastiche somewhat reminiscent of such classic killer-on-the-road movies as Duel and The Road Warrior. Check your tire pressure and keep your gas tank full; if you've ever peered into your rear-view mirror letting your imagination run rampant and wondering just what might be back there in the darkness coming after your bumper, then this is the book for you.

Dark Regions Press Selected Poetry Series: MOON CANOES by Wendy Rathbone; **ANTEPENULT** by W. Gregory Stewart; **THE CROW'S COMPANION** by Jacie Ragan Dark Regions Press--\$3.95 each PO Box 6301, Concord CA 94524

Three collections of poetry from three very different voices that span the gamut of narrative imagery. Wendy Rathbone moves through the genres of science fiction, fantasy, and horror with a wistful sense of self and--dare I say it?--love, even when speaking of vampiric thirsts, the astronaut boneyard, and Wendy's heart broken by Peter Pan. Anyone who can write as a poem as "Unmaking Love" deserves great attention. W. Gregory Stewart also stretches the mental, poetic ear as well as the imagination, journeying from supernovas to warthog mud, introducing us along the way to Andy Warhol's ghost. Jacie Ragan freely admits her fixation on crows--the form is consis-

tently used to represent everything from the harbinger of death and destruction to an airborne soul-mate of sorts. This Selected Poetry Series continues to bring forth the most notable SF/F/H poetry of the mostly small press.

SHIFTING THE BOUNDARIES by Kevin J. Anderson

Dark Regions Press--\$5.95
PO Box 6301, Concord CA 94524

Anderson's greatest achievement out of all his many talent may very well be his vast stylistic range--moving from outright horror tales to fantasy pieces that are almost perfumed with sentiment, Anderson still manages to keep most of these eight tales in that hard-to-classify gray area where genres collide and collapse. "The Old Man and the Cherry Tree" is a strangely sad fable of the son of emperor who's life is wasted behind the walls of a monastery, and just how his final sacrifice to the cherry tree that's come to represent his life's work is received. "Scarecrow" begins with the torturous bloodletting of a man hung out and given up to the dark gods by a belligerent farmer's wife; we're taken on a journey into the core of her ugly, backwoods mind, until she finally meets one of her own evil deities and realizes that perhaps her gifts were not exactly what had been called for. "Dark Angel, Archangel" presents us with a personified Death who tries to keep his newly appointed replacement from destroying mankind at the beckoning of their masters, the Aurorae; though tales of a 'human' Death are in plenty, rarely has the Reaper been given such a fully-rounded, soulful character.

LOST IN BOOTH NINE by Adam-Troy Castro

Silver Salamander Press--\$10.00
22926 NE Old Woodinville-Duval Road, Woodinville WA 98072

For years Adam-Troy Castro has been publishing some of the most powerfully offbeat works in the small press as he steadily ascends into the avenues of the larger publications such as *Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*. He certainly deserves all of the praise he receives, and here, in his first collection, he proves exactly why he merits such respect and distinction.

The stories contained here are all loosely tied to a New York club called *Les Girls XXX*, where the lonely, horny, hungry, and heartless enter a world of squalid pleasures that in many ways takes on a life of its own beyond those of its participants. In "Peep Show" *Les Girls* invites us in to view a lifeforce vampire who drinks away the energy from the minds of the voyeuristic dweebs who pop quarters into the peep machine just to watch her for thirty second clips. Her only human moment of compassion nearly costs her an immortal life. "The Girl in Booth Nine" gives us Rory, an obese, lonely man who gives so much of himself to

watching the XXX-rated videos in *Les Girls* that an unholy presence grows into New York sentence, and it hates him for its own bastard birth. Rory is forced to watch himself become swallowed into the advertisements, TV commercials, and movies of the neighborhood, violated and humiliated for all to watch. In a gruesome, stomach-turningly gross, and downright hysterically final scene Rory gets back everything he's...ah...given to Booth Nine.

Far and away the most memorable piece herein is "The Miracle Drug," a tale which touches on just about every nerve in the mystery/horror/fantasy/science fiction genres and blows them all out. Here you have a suspense story featuring a hard-edged, burned-out near-psychotic cop and his naive rookie partner entering a crack house that turns out to be inhabited by something far more deadly than any street scum. Instead we follow the cops as they meet with Gideon, a once-upon-a-time dealer now transformed by an experimental batch of drugs into a blobous god who commands physical laws with but a thought in his fried mind. Castro moves from the sublime and keenly witty to an unmatched battle of super-human forces, where willpower, guts, madness, and monsters come into play in a wild mixture like never before.

BLOOD KISS and THE BEAST WITHIN ed. by Cecilia Tan

Circlet Press--\$9.95 each PO Box 15143, Boston MA 02215

The trouble with most theme anthologies is that the repetitious device of such a collection often wears the reader down into a sense of predictability, or worse, boredom. Editor Cecilia Tan does well to keep the number of her stories/novellas down in order to take full advantage of the impact of these tales. *Blood Kiss* takes on the theme of erotic vampiric fantasy; each of these seven stories works the gamut of sensuality, from the finely-detailed lusty encounter of Amelia G's displaced leather club circuit vamp who finds herself in the country with an old friend in "Wanting" to Gary Bowen's tale of lost (and found) transsexual identity and discovery of true love in "Brass Ring." Warren Lapine takes us on the taut and agonizing journey of the last vampire's unending need and loneliness in "The Hunger" and Dave Smed's serial killing vampire whose lovers are literally "Loved to Death" and the police detective who hunts her. The stand-out is Renee M. Charles' "Cinnamon Roses", a lusty yet sweetly carnal of a vampire working the underground shaving parlors and her slow and seduction of a nubile waif seeking to satisfy her boyfriend and finds ultimate pleasure herself.

The Beast Within might be an even stronger volume considering the number of werewolf novelettes number only four, each tale with a widely different view as to what it might be to awaken and/or feed our own animal selves. We

move from the ruthless werewolf 'cult' of Jay Michaelson's "The Spirit That Denies" to a Linda Hooper's initial abandonment and eventual rediscovery of the inner-beast in "The Killing of the Calf". Robert M. Schroeck's "Alma Mater" is well-told tale with a saving grace of a twist-ending concerning the life-saving love of a wolf-woman who finds a stranded Italian soldier and in her innocence excites the conquerors' Roman blood in his veins. Finally, Reina Delacroix's (pen name for a shy librarian who certainly knows how to release a beast or two) powerful novella "Wilderland," which uses the now somewhat familiar dropback of virtual reality that in lesser hands would have been simply standard fare but here shifts into an all-stops out rush into the primal part of the souls of a few rare individuals who live out the roaring, howling, animal life.

HYMN TO THE SUN: AN IMITATION by Roger Zelazny

DNA PUBLICATIONS--\$6.95 P.O. Box 13, Greenfield MA 01302-0013

Best known for his science fiction and fantasy novels, Roger Zelazny has often subtly embellished his work with a number of neo-poetry/songs to fine effect, including the navajo material in *Eye of Cat* and recomposition of the ancient Egyptian Ikhnaton's "Hymn to the Sun" in *Flare*. Here, in the author's first collection of poetry, we are introduced to the never-before-published complete "Hymn to the Sun," along with appendixes wherein Zelazny breaks certain reworked versions down into traditional, loosely derivative, and original renditions. In his intriguing introduction, Zelazny offers us his reasoning behind the sub-title as well as its impetus, subsequent organization of the poems, and the expressions therein. Taking a lesson from Robert Lowell's collection *Imitations*, he mentions how "none of the poems in it were translations. But all of them were based upon poems he had known and enjoyed, from other times and places...." Excerpting sections of the Hugo award-winning *Lord of Light*, and placing them alongside those from *Eye of Cat* and *Flare*, as well as Psalm CIV of the King James bible, we witness the restructuring of theological and ethnological materials put to such good use by so popular an author.

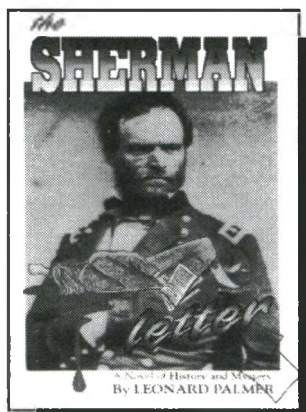
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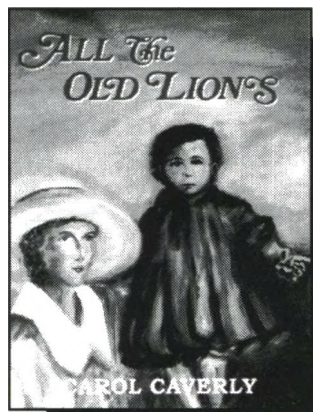
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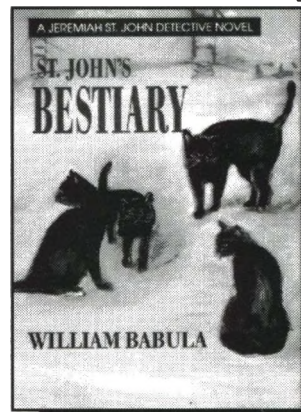
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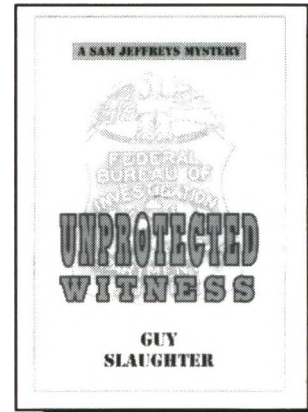
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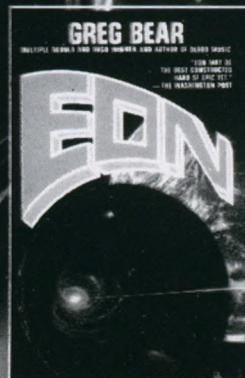
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