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Pirate Writings

Tales of Fantasy, Mystery & Science Fiction

Poetry by

Jane Yolen

"Festival"

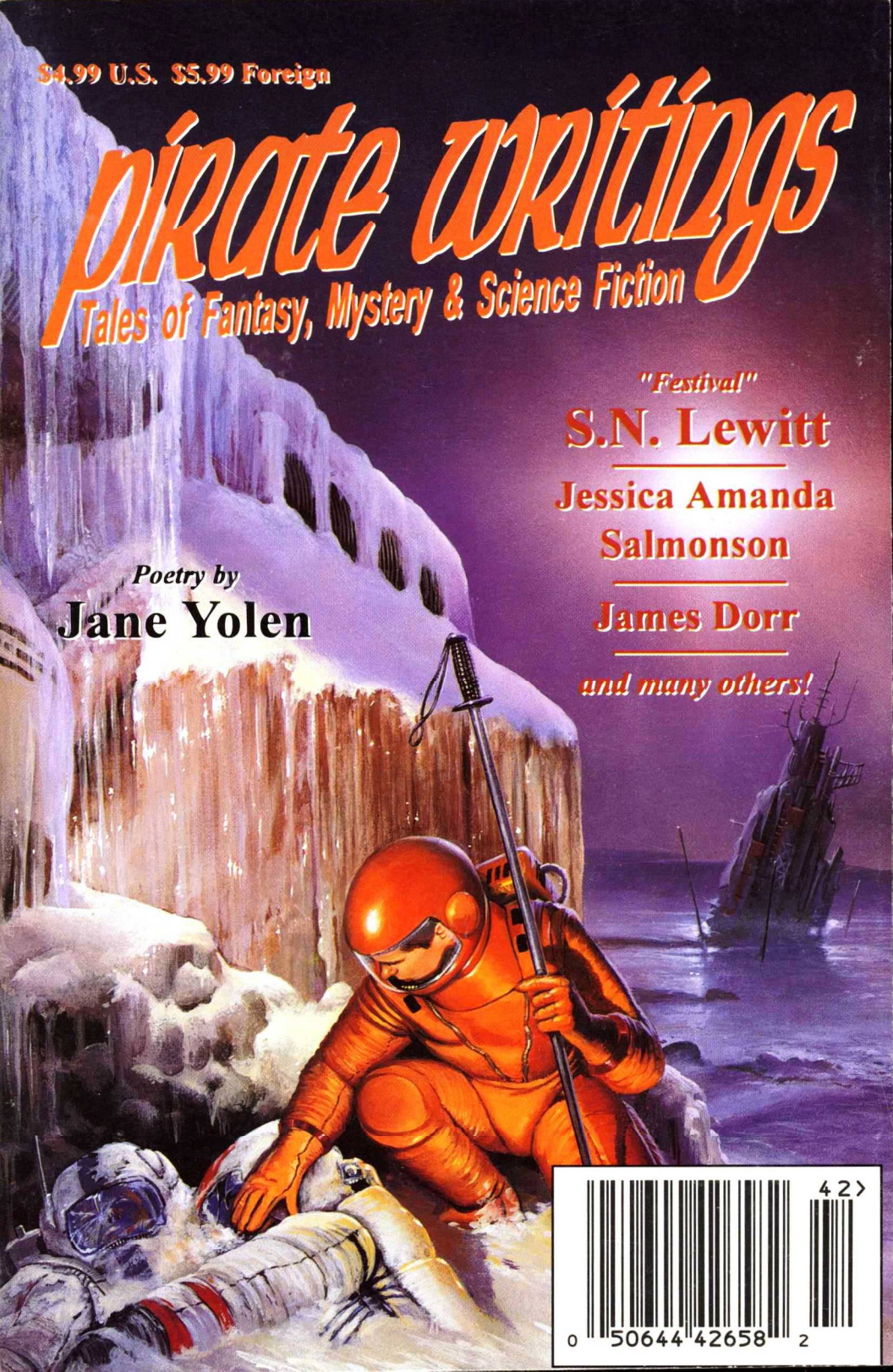
S.N. Lewitt

Jessica Amanda

Salmonson

James Dorr

and many others!



Editorial

There are times when I sit back and wonder why I publish. Is it fun? Does it make money? Is it satisfying? Sometimes. When I decided to make Pirate Writings a semipro magazine, I little understood what that would mean. I learned fast. But, in the end, the product you now hold in your hands is filled with sacrifices. From the writers, to the artists, to me. Sacrifices I wanted to make. Sacrifices I will make again. Pirate Writings will continue to grow, to expand, to deliver the best writing and art. The day I can't do those things, Pirate Writings will cease publication.

Now a short plug for the next issue! The next issue of Pirate Writings will feature stories by Jane Yolen, Josepha Sherman, J.N. Williamson and many others. Don't miss it!

I must give special thanks to Warren Lapine of Harsh Mistress Magazine for all his help, guidance and friendship. Thanks to Janet Fox, Scavengers Newsletter, Carol Joyce, Tom Piccirilli (PW's new Assistant Editor), Owen at Ananta Printing, all the great editors I traded advertisements with, S.N. Lewitt for taking the time out of her busy schedule to write "Festival" for me and all the other writers who have contributed to this fantastic issue. Well, I've babbled on long enough. Read on and enjoy!

Be Well.

Ed McFadden, Editor

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S.N. Lewitt has been called one of the hottest and hippest writers in the Science Fiction field today. Her novel credits include the critically acclaimed Songs of Chaos (Ace), Cybernetic Jungle (Ace) and Cyberstealth (Ace), just to name a few. Her short stories have appeared in numerous magazines and anthologies including: Harsh Mistress, Eye Of The Dragon (Baen) and Bolos 1 & 2 (Baen).

Recently she has been working to complete a book which will appear in hardcover from Tor. "The book I'm working on now, which is yet to be titled, is based on the somewhat darker history of Carnival in Venice, where people went masked most of the year," Shariann writes. "All my books deal with the concept that reality is often subjective and more chaotic than we generally wish to acknowledge. "Festival" is the first short story in which I utilize that theme. Though in general I've been described as a fairly dark writer, "Festival" is one of my first short stories to reflect that."

S.N. Lewitt hails from Washington, D.C. — where she can be found writing, "wasting her life on the internet" and hanging out with a crowd that wears Too Much Black! We are lucky to have her within our pages.

Festival

by S.N. Lewitt



APPY ARE THEY WHO ARE with the rain." The Jester stood in the center of the atrium, his face powdered white with bright blue

rings drawn around his eyes. He was dressed all in white with tattered ribbons attached to his collar and his wrists, and many more on the long white pole that was the symbol of his authority. Always, there is only one Jester to a Festival, and no one should know who he is. But I looked down over the railing and I knew who it was and my mouth went dry.

"Festival. Tonight. It is hungry." I could not mistake that voice. A shriek signaled the end of his announcement. A band of drummers started beating out rhythms, the dances and the hungers, and started parading through the corridors that opened down on the central block.

It was no use trying to work. Carmella and Nadja stood in the doorway two offices down, their hips swaying to the beat. I wondered what their costumes would look like tonight, if they even had costumes ready or would have to make do with leftovers from previous Festivals.

"Aie, Sandro, you have something to wear tonight," Najda yelled at me across the drumming.

"I'm all ready," I told her. "Take care of yourself."

She laughed. She swung her hips and took a few steps into the corridor, following the drummers with their bright ribbons and the Jester who led it all.

I logged off the work account and locked the door behind me. Hector and Tianetta were already gone, following the crowd. I was glad they weren't there to see me slip away, out of sight of the growing parade for the Festival night. It was better that they didn't know.

I went home through the deeply dug corridors of the complex. When the jungle is hungry it is better for us to stay in, and it seems that the jungle is always hungry. The Festival appeases it in some way. Perhaps all the unbridled energy nourishes it.

Or perhaps it finds us entertaining. But I should not say that too loudly, because it is common knowledge (and officially sanctioned, too) that the jungle is not sentient. It is not a being. If it were, we would never have been permitted to settle here.

No, according to all the survey documents and the colonial charter, the jungle is just lush vegetation and vigorous life. It has lost nothing by our presence, though it begrudges us the complex. If we did not have Festivals to cut it back and soothe it, the roots of the twisty trees would tear apart the complex foundation and the dripping sap of the pinkfruit would have encased us like bugs in amber.

I stayed to the deep corridors, well away from the brightness. Already a few people had put on their Festival garb, satins and lames in all the colors of the glitter-bright sky. Many of the women wore plumes in their hair and as tails on their brief beaded skirts. Most of the men were in ribbon tunics or the very old-fashioned tight ship's dress, reinterpreted with reflective sashes, sequined epaulets, and tasseled braids hanging over their arms.

I returned to my room and carefully laid out my Festival clothes. I had had these for a long time but this was the first time I would wear them. The pants were ship-tight and long and the color of dark blood. The sash was white and showed up well against my skin. I untied my hair and brushed it wild over my shoulders, and painted my face with the red patterns of the Men's Society I would join that night. If I passed.

Through the doors I could hear the drumming. It vibrated in the walls, under the heavy planked floor. It was alive the way the jungle was alive, and like the jungle, it had invaded every space in the complex with itself. It mocked our cool smooth halls, our ordered silence. It reminded me of why we had to leave and what our ancestors had left behind.

I thought of these things while I waited with my door closed, as I had



been instructed to do. Someone would come and fetch me when it was time for the Societies to emerge into the revelry. When the first flush of drunkenness was gone and no one was paying attention anymore, then it was time for the Societies to appear.

“Happy are they who are with the rain.”

The chant echoed down the corridor. It approached my door and filled my ears. I wanted to see the procession. It sounded as if there were enough of them now that the candles must be lit and flower petals thrown at regular intervals. I thought I could smell the flowers, dying as the soft pinks and yellows withered to ivory and released their scent more beautifully in death than they ever had alive.

Then the chant moved on, past my door and around the corner. The cadence of their cries and the heaviness of their feet still surrounded me. This sound is part of the Festival, the true voice of our people in this world.

Soon, soon it would be dark. With the killing light gone from the sky, the Jester will open the doors to the outside, to the roof of the complex where the jungle hangs down blotting out the stars.

A light chime interrupted my jumbled thoughts. It was kind of them not to make me wait too long. I thought they might wait until full dark, or maybe until midnight. Or maybe they would wait until the Festival started to die. I opened the door. It was Chema who had come for me.

Chema did not look like my lab partner dressed in his blood red trousers and his high boots and sash. His chest was scarred. I had never noticed before and now I couldn't ask.

“Sandro,” he said, laying a thick hand on my shoulder. “You don't have to do this now. You can always wait another cycle, another Festival. The Societies are full tonight.”

Suddenly I was terribly disappointed. I had anticipated this so long. I had thought of everything, whether the initiation is about the Festival itself, or it was responsible for Chema's scars.

Where would our world be without our Societies? They police the Festival, bringing in the lost and the drunk, and gathering the dead in the morning. Then they put on sunsuits and lay the bodies out in the early morning rain, to dissolve and become one with this place. It is the only acceptance we will ever have here, the only time the fighting between the jungle and the human interlopers is laid to rest.

And I had wanted to join because it was the only way to go outside. I wanted to see the outside, the jungle in daylight, even if only through a double polarized mask. The jungle called to me. I had stood at the complex edge and looked out into it during the last Festival and the one before that, looked into the dark and the stillness there. Not a death stillness, but a waiting quiet, as if it were very silent we wouldn't know it was watching us.

The first reports of this planet were brought by an AI. There are some things that it takes experience and not merely intelligence to know. An AI can do a survey here and see only early development plants, ferns and algae and simple organisms. An AI said this was a safe place, a good place for people to come.

And so they came, because they had enough money to bribe the guards or enough beauty to seduce them. Most of our people here are beautiful in a way that does not seem consistent with what we know of human population. And so I think that must have been a factor in who was sent, who was left behind.

They lost contact with Earth on purpose, those first ones who would never see sky or land again. How little did they know that their progeny would never see sunlight sky again? But they were the pioneers, the ones who were eager to leave the old and embrace tomorrow, and they never looked back. Or so we are taught. They lost contact with Earth. Three generations lived and died on the ship before they arrived here.

Here in a place the AI said was an early Eden, generous and fertile and ready to be tamed. The members of the first landing party died within a year. The atmosphere doesn't protect us well enough from the blazing, inimical sun. So we built underground, out of sight, and let the sun pound on the storage cells on the rooftop, letting it feed us the energy we needed to create light and power to live below. The hydropons became vast underground gardens, neat and carefully regimented, the complete antithesis of whatever was outside. The corridors and chambers of the complex were familiar to those who first lived here, just like the ship they had come on, and had felt was home. Those builders no more wanted to live in dirt and see free atmosphere than the first settlers had wanted to die in the endless nothing between the stars.

At first there were only minor hints of the dangers. The sun killed, but very slowly, so the first generation and even the second were not quite aware of how dangerous it was. And in the first years of the colony the morning rains were cool and fresh. Only later, and very slowly, they became more acidic, eating through the protective plate on the upside of the complex.

Only the corrosive rain did not seem to hurt the jungle. If anything, the native vegetation became stronger, more vigorous, as the morning rains ate away more and more of our shielding. As the metals rusted and decayed, tangled roots took hold and started to grow. Vines attached and our shell bloomed bright yellow and pink and pale blue with common flowers. Then the seedlings started, sprouting out of our solar collectors, bursting into giant ferns in only a few months' time.

And then there was the first Festival. No one knows particularly why it was called that. The best theory says that people knew they were going to die; that the jungle had crushed them and was slowly grinding the complex to dust. And so everyone went a little crazy and it got out of hand.

Every schoolchild knows about that first Festival, about the fights and the settlers pushed outside and left to die. Only it was night and the jungle was asleep, and the settlers were too angry to give up. Or perhaps they wanted to take the enemy with them. So they took their grandfathers' machetes and began hacking at the ferns and the flowers, at the sickly sweet pinkfruit and the sticky vines that glowed luminous in the starlight. They hacked through the cover as they had never been able to do before, and piled the remains and started a bonfire. They poured cleaning fuel down the slope of the complex and lit it, and the whole cover blazed against the jungle in the night.

And on the rooftop, awaiting final destruction, they partied. They drank and sang to the end of the grand experiment, of the colony that had such high hopes and was coming to a painful end. They put on their best clothes and painted themselves and danced around the fire with drunken glee. They were dying, but the enemy had been injured. The enemy at least knew they were there.

Inside the complex, the fires burning over the skin heated the metal corridors. The fires burning down the side walls channeled into the filtration system and sucked the smoke inside. Smoke filled the tiny rooms. The people

who had been left inside died, suffocated while their neighbors danced overhead.

The revelers above tried the outer doors before dawn. They did not believe they would return to the inner world. Every one of them must have thought they would die in the early rain. But no one was left alive inside the complex and so the doors opened easily.

I am glad I will never have to face what those early colonists saw when they returned home. Lying in the hallways and in personal rooms, across desk sets and in the dining hall, the dead waited. Maybe two hundred in all had died in that first Festival.

The colonists left alive brought the bodies out in the last hour of night. There was no way they could bury so many, could rid the complex of massive death. The rain came down in the cool grey dawn and dissolved the dead, sluicing dissolving remains into the jungle below.

Happy are they who are with the rain.

The jungle never grew back over the complex. Later Mateo added the ceramic shield that keeps the rain at bay for months longer. But the vines and vegetation never took hold overhead again.

Some people said it was because the jungle was afraid, it knew we would fight back. Others said it was because the taste of the dead appeased it. Everyone who dies is brought to the roof in full procession of their death, and perhaps these single tastes of our mortality reassures the thing around us.

Because this jungle is aware. It knows us, knows we are here. And it hates us. I can feel the hatred every time I look into its heart. Which is why I was recruited into the Society.

Litter filled the hallway. An empty cup lay looking forlorn among torn beads and ribbons and the glitter confetti that stood for the rain. Chema walked over the trash and turned the opposite direction from the drumming, which had gotten wilder. He led me through familiar territory, leading to the upward locks and the barrier bays that formed a second skin in the complex; just in case. Though no one ever said that.

Chema touched a door that I had never seen in the barrier group. It opened into dark. A few candles were lit, and when my eyes adjusted to the light I saw fifteen members of the Red Men's Society standing around a table that had been cut from the woody stem of a giant fern and carved and smoothed so that it was as fine as celadon steel. Three candles stood sputtering, their wax pooling over the sanded surface. The faces around the table were grim, out of keeping with the frenzy of Festival.

"Sandro, you have requested to join the Red Society," one of the old men said. "But you don't know what the Societies are. So you will be Chema's partner tonight. He will instruct you, do as he says. And by the rain you will know many things."

Then each of the men mumbled something and passed out small, functional knives in businesslike sheathes that were tucked into the sashes. Chema handed me one, and showed me how the clip fit into the lining of the sash. I could feel the knife pressing into my hip against my bare skin. It felt scary. And it felt

*"Happy are they who
are with the rain."*



good.

The doors were already open to the outside, and along with the Red Society, I left the confines of the complex for the rooftop.

Here was dancing, drinking, revelry that was Festival. The drums had captured the bodies and spirits of the people on the roof. Their bright ribbons twirled in the starlight, their polished machetes flashed in the traditional dance before they began hacking at the foliage.

Chema touched my shoulder. "Come with me," he said.

I followed him out of the bright center of the Festival into the shadows down near the complex slope. Here were the niches and hollows where the jungle began to grow, where those imbued with Festival spirit stole away to have sex and drink and get sick. And sometimes die.

Chema had his knife out, a small knife that was nothing compared to the great machetes used to hack through encroaching fronds. He held his finger to his lips as we approached the first familiar hollow.

I knew this place well. At a Festival eight years ago I had come here with Ana Luz, her hand sticky in mine with dead beer and syrup. We had stumbled into the hollow and I had proceeded to take off her costume skirt while she had giggled in the dark. It had been my first time and I had been overwhelmed. Ana Luz had laughed at me. She had already had half the boys in our class. Not that I cared. That night I only cared about myself, and her.

When I had finished and lay in a drained stupor, Ana Luz had asked me if I wanted any more beer. She wanted some, she said, and she was going to come back. She told me to stay.

I had stayed in that hollow, a bubble fold in the complex skin, for hours. I could hear the Festival going on around me, saw shadows flitting down the first stage of the slope, saw the stars move. But Ana Luz never came back. That morn-

ing her body had been set out with the others in the rain.

We bypassed the first bubble and the second. "Too much light," Chema said. But at the third there was full dark. Chema lifted his knife as he slipped into the fault fold that hid the chamber from view. I slid in after him, wondering what he would do and was suddenly faintly afraid.

He stamped a red glow-patch on the curved wall so we could see quite clearly that there were two young people doing what Ana Luz and I had done so long ago. That first flush of Festival, when everything was free, still glimmered in their eyes. Even when they noticed us they didn't seem to care. Maybe they had drunk too much, or were too far gone.

Chema tore them apart and his knife descended on the boy's throat. A boy, only thirteen or so, and now dead. Dead not from the jungle or the Festival, of an accident or disease. Dead from Chema's hand.

He turned to me. "You do the girl."

I froze in the red light. I had never thought, never considered such a thing. The Festival fed the jungle, surely, but there were enough drunks, enough mishaps, enough people who would find themselves lost and abandoned after the complex seals had been closed.

The girl's eyes went wide and she started screaming. Chema clamped a hand over her mouth. Even covered that way I thought of Ana Luz, who had looked nothing like this girl at all.

Chema sighed. "You do or I do," he said. "If it is quick, it's merciful. Think if we left her in the rain alive."

I raised my hand slowly. The knife massed the weight of the world. So this was the function of the Societies, to gather the harvest that appeased the jungle, to make sure there were enough dead in the rain to keep our fragile peace.

Chema nodded and smiled sadly. "Do it," he said. "It is our duty. To provide for us all. Or the jungle will eat the complex in one cycle and we're all dead."

I looked at him. The girl had lost none of her terror, but resignation and regret had joined fear.

I raised the knife high overhead, knowing what I had to do and not quite knowing how. I had never killed a person before. I had never wanted to. And I didn't want to do it this time, either.

I stabbed down with all my strength. Chema's face registered shock before his eyes glazed in dying. "Get out of here," I told the girl. "And if I ever hear you say anything . . ."

She gulped and ran. I didn't think she would talk.

Chema's body would do as well as hers for a sacrifice. Better probably. He was a large man and she was barely a teenager and hadn't gotten her growth. There would be much more death in Chema's body for the jungle to savor.

I pulled both Chema and the boy out of the hollow and dragged them, one at a time, to the entrance of the downslope. Someone, probably a member of one of the Societies, would find them there.

For myself, I knew what I had to do. Through the panic there was cold, crystalline thought. I had to escape. I had to hide deep in the lower halls of the complex, down in the machinery where no one ever went; live in the ventilation ducts, steal food from the hydroponics. If I ever showed my face again, I was dead. The Society would not think about killing me, just more fodder for the rain.

I had to lurk in the non-places of the complex because I had to live. I had

a job to do. At the next Festival, and the one after that.

The girl had crouched down near the slope's edge, watching me. I smiled. "Can you help me?" I asked her.

She nodded solemnly and moved forward.

"Not here," I said. "But later. Could you get food for me, and leave it near the venting room system's door?"

She stared at me wide-eyed, and then nodded as if she suddenly saw my plan as clearly as I did, though she couldn't. "Can I help next time?" she asked.

I shook my head. "Maybe when you're older," I said. "When you're twenty-one and can join a Society."

The Societies preyed on us, on all the silent and the lonely who come out for Festival. They kept the fresh supply of dead without ever taking the risk themselves. Now it was time to change, I thought. Now the hunters should become the prey, should become part of the tribute to our survival.

And I would do that, I thought. I would start a new Society, one that was dedicated to harvesting only the best. Only from the Societies. And the girl would be my first recruit.

I walked freely through the crowd, saw the dancing and merrymaking in the last hours before dawn. Then I went back through the seals, back into the complex. There was very little time.

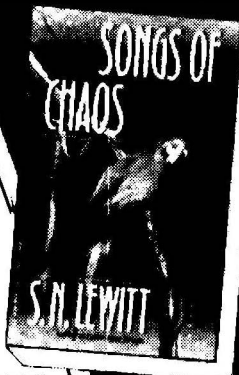
I dropped my Society clothes down the disposal chute and tied back my hair. Then I pulled on a plain working overall and packed up my best things; my favorite boots, my grandmother's silver picture-frame with a picture of my early ancestors, my story-disks all went into the sheet. Then I added practical things, underwear and socks, and tied up the bundle. I took a good supply of food from the dining room, too, while everyone was watching the very end of the Festival, wondering who had lived and who had died in the night. I made four trips, and managed to secure even a decent supply of beer along with preserved bread and dried vegetables and beans and ready-made fish and rice in hot trays.

The ventilation shafts were barely large enough for me to move, but there were plenty of places they let out where I could set up a base. The pump room, the vent room, the various service areas on every level. I would survive.

Next Festival I would emerge, a new Society all in myself, and I would kill again, giving the members of the other Societies to the jungle.

I could hear the doors and the drumming through the shaft. It echoed around me here as if I were in the belly of the noise. "Happy are they who are with the rain."

*Don't miss the special
subscription offer on
page 58 !*



Something was very strange about this place. More than the birds or the language or the animals painted in the pseudo-jungle, there was something deeply twisted here. Something that seemed alien from even the Trader People, or at least what Dante knew of them. He was completely out of place and nothing at all made sense. Which was not, come to think of it, an altogether unfamiliar situation.

—Excerpted from *Songs of Chaos*

"Serpents!" screamed another voice suddenly. For a moment it seemed the word was not understandable, the scream had been so primitive and plainly a shriek of fright.

Jim looked out beyond that side of the pirate ship that was blocked by Edouard's vessel and stored at what he saw. For several hundred yards around them the sea seemed to be boiling.

—Excerpted from *The Dragon at War*

When Jim Eckert is transported to an alternate England, he gains the ability to change into a dragon—and he's never needed that talent more, for France plans to invade England with the help of the sea serpents. No creature is more powerful, not even the Dragon Knight; but Jim is all that stands between England and annihilation.

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S.N. LEWITT

Acclaimed author of *Cybernetic Jungle*

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Mark Rich's short stories have appeared in Full Spectrum 4 (Bantam), Amazing Stories, Expanse, Analog, Deathrealm and many others. He also has short fiction upcoming in Science Fiction Age, Analog and Universe 3 (Bantam), just to name a few.

About "Perfume" he writes, "I have long been involved with food cooperative ventures. Perhaps that's why social consciousness might be read into 'Perfume'."

Mark lives in Stevens Point, Wisconsin, where he can be found keeping track of captive amphibians, cooking, taking quiet walks and sipping a beer or two. I'm sure we'll see more of this talented writer in the future.

Perfume

by Mark Rich



ON'T GO BACK," SHE SAID, running a hand through the ground corn. "Stay home. Or work a different field. They'll let you."

Dolores de las Flores Martinez brushed hair from her forehead. For the fourth time she pulled the cotton sleeve up her forearm.

Her son shook his head and rolled over on the mattress, then rose and walked to the other side of the camp they called home. He moved to the edge of the bridge where he became a shadow.

"You're going back to the field too, Mama?" he asked.

"Not to that one, Mario," she said.

"I get paid more."

"For what? You heard the man today. You have to watch out. Natalie Castellanos, she has cancer. You heard about Jimmy. Dying. Leukemia. And Carlo. I pray for him each morning. They took out the kidney. Still, he has the cancer."

"Don't want to talk about it."

"We have to, Mario. Whom do you love? You love your mama. You love your sister Mayra. You just saw her. In the hospital. Do you love that money? We don't need it."

"Don't need it?" A low undertone ran beneath his voice. "We live here and don't need it?"

"The man said —"

"Don't care."

"You haven't been looking well, Mario. I didn't want to say so but you haven't been looking well."

"I'm fine. It's dark here. It's almost night. One day we'll get a room,

with heat and lights and water, Mama.”

“I’m losing Mayra and I don’t want to lose you because of high dreams.”

He stood silently. In the fading light he appeared broader, or flatter, as if he were no more than he appeared to be, a shadow in the air. “I’m going for a walk, Mama.”

“You need your rest if you’re going to work in that field. You need rest, you need strength, Mario. It’s the field of the devil. That man didn’t say so but I know it’s true. It’s a devil field.”

“It’s an angel field, Mama. Eddie has dreams of angels coming down in that field. It’s an angel field. It brings us money.” He was grinning at her. His teeth glowed.

She dreamed of older times. Hard, even with Pedro the times had been hard. Pedro was three years gone, he had promised to meet them this side of the border.

She missed him as she did mornings. First light made her think of his mussed hair, his pursed lips widening in a yawn as he stretched. They would have smelled each other’s perfumes and laughed. How could you sleep away the smell of the fields?

“More at Cole’s field,” said Victoria Coro when they picked grapes together that morning. Her long, severe face looked sepulchral when she spoke seriously. “Two guards, one’s dead.”

Dolores nodded as if she had known.

“The other one, he’s hurt,” said Victoria. “A huge wolf. He said it sprang out of the dark, stronger than a man. Maybe he’s lying. They’ve taken Eddie Ramirez away because he keeps talking about angels. Even though the guard comes back with this story about a wolf they suspect Eddie.”

“Eddie isn’t the kind to do anything. He’s devoted to his mother.”

“Eddie’s a sweet boy.”

They carried grapes to the packing shed. Dolores nodded to the other women and went to the last table where she sometimes felt a breeze. In the mornings a vestige of night’s coolness made work easy. In afternoons the heat grew heavy even with the fan blowing. Sweat mixed with the tang of grapes and musty pesticide residue until one could hardly breathe.

“Pack carefully,” said a voice behind her, loudly enough for others to hear. “Carefully, and tightly. Handle them like you’d handle me.” He laughed.

He patted the unfinished wood on the sides of the table as if he patted something he loved.

“You leave me alone, Fermin,” Dolores said.

“What a way to greet me, Dolores. I say hello and you spit. But I see you working and I think how sweet you are. I see you packing grapes with slim fingers and I think about oh, so many things.” He lowered his voice. “I see your fine legs and I think to myself, this is a woman who needs a man, she needs a man like Fermin. She has needs, doesn’t she, like everyone?” He stood near. “I think she needs that fine thing a man and woman do together.” He touched the seam of her jeans.

She jerked away. “Leave me alone.”

“Ah, what a sweet woman.” He laughed. “I hear Mario comes home late, Dolores. If at all. The Coles would like to know someone was up wandering those

nights when people were getting hurt. Maybe it wasn't a wolf, eh? Maybe a guard had a little wine and thought a wolf made a better story than saying a boy jumped him with a kitchen knife when he was drunk. Wouldn't that be something to tell the Coles?"

Dolores said nothing.

"But maybe I won't tell Mister Cole," said Fermin. "Maybe I'll come calling tonight. Just to check, eh? Maybe your son won't be there, eh, Dolores? Maybe we'll be alone, you and I, if what these people say is true, that your son disappears at night when these strange things happen at the Cole field."

"Lots of boys go out at night," Dolores said.

"I'll come calling," Fermin said. "I'll have to check, after all, won't I? Wouldn't want to lie to the Coles about so serious a thing. Have to check for sure."

He brushed his hand along her jeans and left the shed.

One did not have this job if one wanted to cry, she told herself.

"Hey, Dolores," said Victoria from the other side of the shack, holding up something in her hand. "Look at this tiny little grape. One of Fermin's, eh?" She threw it fiercely against the wooden wall. The grape burst.

The other women and Dolores laughed. She threw down two small grapes and ground them in the dust. Fermin's stones. One had to laugh.

In the morning she had dreamed of Mario and the others working the devil's field, turning into wolves and spreading out from the shanty towns to the white towns, kicking dusty soil into the air with their claws till the moon glowed in the center of a magic circle as it did before a storm. They leaped on guards, tearing and eating, then went into town and shit neat little piles on shining American cars parked in front of neat houses with neat, watered lawns. Wolves ran car to car, leaping down to blacktop and up to waxed hoods and trunks. They crouched in the dog way, leaving little pieces of blackness; tiny residues of a Mister Masters or a Cranshaw or Billings or Trowman or one of the other guards who hardly



cared about people but only about keeping the bosses happy and keeping the grapes coming into the sheds, packed neatly in crates.

In the morning the wolves loped back to their dusty places where their wives and girlfriends and daughters and sons slept, changed back to men, put on clothes, then went back to the field belonging to Mister Cole. There they breathed in the fine sifting dust that the sprayers sent over the grapevines every morning, breathed it to the bottom of their lungs, because it was the finest perfume. It made the grapes grow to the size of staring eyes, it was a scent that a man could breathe in deeply.

Because it was truly perfume, the women wore it home after picking in the fields. They went home and the men smelled it on them and they, too, smelled of it, or of another stronger one from some other field. All the clothes in the household smelled of the perfume. The children smelled of the perfume. Everything smelled of perfume.

Dolores sat with Maria Zavala for a while sharing news. Señor Cole had posted men with guns around his fields. Other field owners also increased their guard. Dolores shook her head at the stories. Already people told new ones. Wolves everywhere. Eddie acted strangely in jail. He still saw angels. And other men at the Cole fields acted strangely.

It's the perfume they wear, Dolores joked. You smell funny, you act funny.

Afterwards, she sat by the fire talking to herself. She cooked and ate supper, glancing occasionally from the shelter of the bridge as the scenery slowly disappeared into the dark. She spoke into the air about the events of the day, of Eddie, of Victoria, of the tales of the wolf, of Fermin's threat.

She wondered if what she heard was true, that dogs had sharper hearing than humans.

Weariness overtook her once she finished eating. A low breeze blew through the valley, rustling leaves and branches in the low scrub. The air felt good in her lungs, and smelled of dry grass and dirt. It would blow clean through her tonight. She would have no more dreams of wolves.

She woke to the pressure of a hand against her face.

"Dolores," said a voice. A sickly smell assaulted her nose.

She tried to shout against the hand. Her heart pounded with fury.

The hand forced cloth against her lips — a handkerchief, she realized, still sweaty from the day's work. He tied it behind her head.

"No noise out of you," Fermin whispered. "Since Mario isn't here, yes? You wouldn't want me to say anything, would you? So maybe we'll get along together, you and me. It'll be our private thing. We'll go a little way away, where we can be alone."

He looked larger than in day. Holding her wrists in one hand he forced her from the shelter of the bridge. The wind rustled leaves.

"You played hard to get, pretty one," Fermin said. His words hissed. She imagined seeing the burn mark on his temple even in darkness. "You played hard to get. You wouldn't come to my nice office room where I have a comfortable couch, so now we have to get to know each other on the dirt, in the weeds. I don't care, not when it's love." He laughed quietly, drawing out a rope and binding her wrists.

Dolores imagined the look on his face. She had seen it many times.

When he led girls into his office. When he came out afterwards.

“Kiss me,” he said. He forced her head forward, biting the gag between her lips and then laughing.

He pushed her to the ground.

“Now, Dolores.”

He dropped his pants to his knees. He stood that way, as if she should be inspired by the sight. But she saw nothing, nothing except his dark form silhouetted against the dimly lit sky, and his eyes. They had a faint luminescence.

“Now, Dolores,” he said again, bending down. Nearer, she could see the whites of his eyes better. “Now.” He reached for her.

She saw Fermin’s eyes come nearer, and felt his fingers touch her, reaching for the front of her thin nightshirt. Her adrenalin raced at the roughness of his hands.

But she saw only the whites of his eyes.

The whites widened.

A shout almost emerged from between his teeth that shined briefly in the darkness below the white eyes; a shout for help was punched from his lungs by a ragged shadow that flew over her in the rough grasses and slammed Fermin’s body onto the scuffed soil beyond. It snarled and darted shadowy jaws down to the place below the head where the cry for help had caught, incompletely uttered, a flayed, damp thing of no power, a useless plea for help against what had already occurred.

She screamed and wondered why nothing came out, forgetting the gag in her mouth tighter than the dead man’s grip. She feared what had happened. Mario had come for her. Surely. The insect sprays in the devil’s field had gotten to him. Her Mario. Her own son. He had come.

The sound of the wolf and the smell of its hair and stink of its breath filled her world; these, and Fermin’s strangled cry and weakening struggle. And her shaking.

She heard a cracking sound. Did bones crack that way? Did wolves crack bones? She heard more; crack, crack, crack. Leg, arm, neck. This wolf would be leaving piles of Fermin shit all over town. Fermin’s sickly smell gave way to the smell of fur and a harder smell. She knew how blood tasted but had never smelled it so strongly. She wondered how much blood it took before you smelled it, before it drowned out all other smells.

Someone pulled her to her feet from behind and began leading her back to the bridge. The wolf still pulled at its prey in the weeds.

Everything smelled of perfume.

“It’s all right, Mama,” said a voice next to her ear. “Don’t look. Don’t look at that. It’s all right.”

Ahead of her she heard other people under the bridge, waking because of the fight and Fermin’s sharp cry.

She tried to block everything. She wanted only awareness of the calming hands on her arms, leading her back to their camp, untying her, rubbing her arms, finally embracing her. He hugged her close. It smelled like him.

“Mario,” she said, her gag gone. “You’re here.”

“Of course, Mama,” he said.

“You aren’t a wolf.”

“Wish I were.”

"Mario!"

"Just talking, Mama. Don't listen to me."

A beam of light approached them from where the Zavalas slept. That family had a flashlight among their possessions.

"Que ocurre?"

Miguel, Maria's husband, flashed the light over Dolores and Mario.

"He's getting it good," Mario said, looking out beyond the bridge.

When Miguel swung his flashlight toward the grassy opening a pair of glassy beads reflected the brightness.

They looked straight at her.

Later, after the field guards took away Fermin's body and finished their questioning, Dolores sat by the fire. She looked at Mario, expecting him to speak.

"What do you know, Mario?" she said.

"Nothing," he said.

His shoulders hunched more than she liked.

"You don't want to become like that," she said.

Mario made no reply.

"What would your father say?" she said.

"Join him. That's what he'd say."

"Mario!"

Later she slept, and dreamed again of Pedro. Pedro was near now, she dreamed, maybe even standing near the bridge in the night gazing at their small camp of two mattresses and a scattered bed of coals. His ears would prick up in the wolf way at the sound of their quiet breathing. Later he would leave the bridge and leave piles of guard-shit in town. Maybe he would read her mind and go shit on those nice cars; little brown pieces of Fermin, spoiling those nice things.

Around her she smelled the heavy odor from burned-out coals. She smelled Mario's sweat from his mattress nearby. And the perfume. Mario had perfume, she had perfume, fixed forever in their skin and their clothes.

Everywhere, the perfume.

PCW

THE CUTTING

The sword --
it does not sing . . .
deft fingers ply
with a magic all their
own.

Cold iron's
dance of death
hews and hacks,
like a sturdy axe;
No more manna . . .
timeless, bubbling stream
rent in the passing,
the fall of ancient oaks.

J. W. Donnelly
El Paso, TX

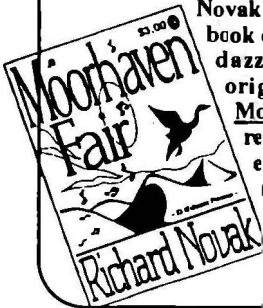
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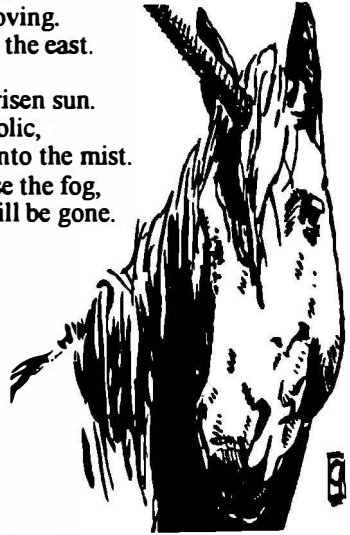
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In early morning, the moon sets.
 The darkness is black, silent, unmoving.
 Then the stars fade as the sky pales to the east.
 Mist, rising from the river,
 covers the field, obscuring the newly-risen sun.
 Around the fountain, unicorns frolic,
 white bodies and silver hooves blending into the mist.
 Later, when the sun and breeze disperse the fog,
 and humans are around, the unicorns will be gone.

- Angela Kessler
 Blacksburg, VA



I feel the magic in the cold mountain air
 You have but to believe and it is everywhere
 Unicorns and fairies are just around every turn
 Goblins and witches with cauldrons that burn
 Live in this mundane world if you will
 But I'm going where each breath is a thrill
 Nothing in this world holds any magic for me
 Come with me to a world of unreason, we will be free
 We'll dance with fairies and run with unicorns
 An we'll drift off to sleep to the sound of PAN'S horns

Warren Lippine
 Greenfield, MA

THE LONG CELLAR

Jack Dogherty knew a merrow
 could drink any man of Ennis
 under the pub table
 and still find strength
 to crawl back to the sea.
 No wonder.
 That red-nosed stormbringer
 practiced his tipping
 from the casks of drowned ships:
 the dark, sweet brown Malmsey
 from the Portuguese isles;
 venerable Jerez rounding the coast;
 and the light bodied Medoc
 lost in the seas between Dover and Calais.
 His was a long cellar,
 where little colored fish
 swam like Japan lanterns
 A man could get full soused
 in such a place, singing out sea songs
 or songs of the vine,
 whichever makes you merrier.

Jane Yolen
 Hatfield, Mass.





"An Early Frost" comes to us from all the way across the pond in Kincardineshire, Scotland from a new Scottish writer William Meikle. His stories have begun to surface in U.K. small press magazines such as Phantasy Province, Black Tears, Grotesque, and Flickers n' Frames, among others. He has stories forthcoming in U.S. magazines including Haunts, Eulogy and four of his stories received Honorable Mentions in the upcoming Datlow & Windling Year's Best Fantasy & Horror.

William writes, "The inspiration for 'An Early Frost' came in a dream - honest, and I wrote it in one sitting. A very rare occurrence for me."

An Early Frost

by William Meikle



AND DON'T COME OUT UNTIL I say so."

The cold emotionless voice spoke through the thin wood of the door which rattled on its hinges as it slammed. Billy Morrison was left in the cold and the dark and the quiet. Again.

He listened as his father stomped back downstairs, the steps vibrating through the floors, sending shockwaves through Billy's buttocks and thighs as he began to push himself off the floor.

"I'll bet he's going to sit in front of the telly all night, drinking beers and smoking cigarettes. That's all he's good for. I hate him."

He immediately covered his mouth with both hands. Even though it was the truth, he had no wish to be overheard. He'd made that mistake before, and that time he'd ended up having to be kept out of school for a week - "Suffering from a touch of flu" his mother, who had still been around at the time, had said. It was a funny sort of flu, which gave you black and blue bruises all over your body and made you pee blood for days afterwards.

He rubbed his upper arm, inspecting the large white finger imprints which blossomed there, now slowly filling up red. Using only his fingertips he pushed at the inflamed area, lightly, until the pain came. This time everything was okay. There was only a dull ache, not the bright flaring pain of a broken bone.

Billy had just passed his ninth birthday and already had too much experience with hospitals and plaster casts. He had lost count of the number of times he had "fallen down stairs" or "walked into doors", or "slipped in the bath." When the doctors, and then the social workers, and then the police had asked him

about his accidents, he had gone along with his parents' story. His friend Tommy had told him that you don't get to heaven if you tell tales, and Billy would have dearly loved to go to heaven.

He was a thin child. As he lifted his T-shirt over his head, it was possible to count all his ribs and, as he leaned over the bed, it was possible to see how scrawny and spindly his legs had become.

He drew a pajama jacket from under his pillow and pulled it around him, fastening it in front with a small length of string. Slowly, on tiptoe, so as not to be overheard, he made his way to his wardrobe, expertly avoiding the many creaking floorboards that would give him away. Silently shifting aside a box of old toys, he reached in and took out the two items he always kept hidden -- a book and a flashlight.

Five minutes later he was under the bedclothes, all carefully arranged so that no light seeped out and no cold could get in. The flashlight was lit, protecting him, wrapping him in his own warm, yellow world. He was very soon lost, somewhere under the Misty Mountains, in the land of Bilbo the Hobbit.

Sometime later he was asleep, having seen Bilbo out of the dark and up the mountains on the back of the king of eagles. He dreamed, his eyelids twitching, of goblins, red-eyed in the blackness, pot-bellied and thick-armed, stinking of sweat, beer and smoke, arranged in serried ranks as they marched upwards, into the light, led on by the incessant drum of his heart.

He was finally forced awake by the smell, the noise, and the fear, but the drumbeat stayed, banging into his brain from just underneath his pillow.

He lifted his head, banishing the rhythms back to dreamland as he checked the dark corners for goblins that might be trying to creep up on him.

He was wise to the ways of goblins. They would hide, listening and watching, just waiting to catch him misbehaving and drag him, screaming and kicking, downwards, down to the depths where the drums beat and the smoke hissed and Gollum was waiting just around the corner.

He lay still, making sure the dreams had gone, before venturing from his sanctuary. He could tell by the silence that it was late in the night. The house, the street, possibly the whole world, had shut down, building its energy for the coming day, trying to make sense of the one which had just passed. Nothing breathed.

This was the best time. It was a time of peace, a time of quiet freedom, a time for play. He pulled back the covers and slipped out of bed, feeling the floorboards cold and rough underfoot.

Quickly, silently, he removed his pajama jacket and reached for his clothes, a pair of denims, gold battered training shoes, two T-shirts and a thick jacket. It would be cold outside.

Moonlight showed him the way to the door, silver, sharp, crisp and clear. He was more confident in the dark; he had no need to hide. He opened the door, making sure he slipped out before it reached wide enough to creek. Tonight he would not need his flashlight. His friend the moon would show him the way.

The foot of the stairs was reached with no further sound. Light spilled from under the living room door, a flickering blue. His father must have fallen asleep in the armchair again in front of the whispering television, slumped almost to the floor, mouth hanging open, belly pointed skyward. Billy listened and could hear the deep regular rumblings of his father's snores. He was finally able to let out a breath as he headed for the back door and freedom. Beyond the door the silver light beckoned, leading him out to the garden where the shadows fell,

sharp and black, and the sky danced with the firefly stars.

He wasted no time. His goal was waiting. The dark houses sat on either side of him as he travelled the well-trodden path. He looked up, soaking in the moonlight, filling up his deep gray eyes.

He had left the houses behind now, and in front of him all was silent as he surveyed the dark pool, a sleeping part of the river, stretching away into the blackness. The reflected moon winked at him as a ripple passed, before returning solid and dependable to show him to his place.

The large rock welcomed him, as it always did, as he sat and surveyed his domain. Over in the shadows, almost under the bank, the heron stood, gray and blue and vigilant. It was sleeping, but still watchful, waiting for an unwary fish to spur it into a blur of deadly action.

In the blackness to his left there was a rustling which brought a small smile to his face. The ghost-white owl was still there. He remembered its hunting eyes, its cruel beak, as his mind wandered, thinking of eagles and mountains, rings and riddles, dark pools and moonlight.

He was brought awake by a sudden cold draft and noticed that the moon had gone, hidden behind a small cloud. The darkness had become softer, the shadows more threatening, and there was a sound just loud enough to hear, a whispering and a crackling -- like the quiet sound of the television when the programs have finished for the day. From behind the clouds there was a flash of sudden moonbeam, and he caught a glimpse of something white. No, not white, silver; silver and blue and white and radiant, all at the same time. And then it was gone, but not completely.

Something had been left behind. He scrambled off his rock and approached. As he did so the moon reappeared and he was able to see the ice, noticeably thick and growing out to a foot from the bank. From off to one side he heard laughter, a boy's laugh, as if from far away.

He waited quietly; he was good at these things. The wisp of cloud passed on and the pool was again bathed in sharp moonlight. He listened and finally heard. The crackling returned to his left under the trees. Being careful, pretending he was at home, he crouched into a crawl inching slowly forward.

Under the trees the water was in a thick black shadow, and the crackling had grown louder. A patch of moonlight found its way through the branches and was softly rippling in the water.

As he watched, the rippling firmed and the moon faded, disappearing, eaten away from the shore to the center as the ice formed and the crystals cracked and the water solidified. A feather appeared in the moonlight, a small glowing feather, out of which the ice poured through thin veins of pulsating silver as it brushed across the water. And, guiding the feather, just coming into sight, was a small boy's hand.

The laughter came again as another cloud obscured the moon and the scene again faded to black. Billy waited. He was not an impatient child.

The temperature fell further causing him to shiver, but he stayed still - he had endured much worse. Finally he was rewarded. The cloud moved on, the moon shone and the perpetrator of the laughter was revealed. Billy felt a warmth spreading through him. Life had finally surprised him, really surprised him for the first time in many days.

At first glance it looked like a boy, small, thin, about the same age as Billy. It only took a second glance to see it was no normal boy. His skin was blue,



a thin watery blue like the clearest summer sky, and the veins which stood out proud from his arms pulsed in pure silver. His hands were long and thin, the fingers ending in jet-black fingernails. But, his eyes were deep and kind as he held the feather out to Billy.

Billy did not need to be asked twice. He took it, feeling the cold spread through his fingertips. He bent to the water's edge and stroked the feather across its surface. He felt a cold thrill pass up his arm as the feather pulsed and a thin trace of ice drew itself on the black liquid. He passed the feather across a second time, enthralled as the ice thickened and the cold in his arms deepened. He hadn't noticed it yet, but the fingernail on his thumb had turned black.

He turned back to the boy, handing back the feather. The blue boy took it and looked at Billy for a long time. Billy could still feel the cold creeping through him, but he didn't mind it. He was caught in the enchantment of the moment.

He watched as the boy bent to an unfrozen patch of water and immersed the feather completely. There was a sudden flash, blue and silver, which momentarily dazzled Billy. When his eyes recovered, the boy was standing in front of him, a feather in each hand. He offered the left one to Billy.

He realized he was being offered something big, something which would affect his life from now on. He took it with barely a second thought, feeling again the deep blue cold stretching up his arms. This one was even lighter, its whiteness dazzling him if he looked too closely.

The other boy took Billy's free hand, leading him up river away from the pool. Billy looked back, only once, and saw that behind them they were leaving a trail of silver, a covering of frost which grew as they moved on, spreading in a blanket across the short grass.

He was led to a waterfall where he stroked icicles into being from the falling water. He was stunned when one dip of his feather on the edge of a reservoir sent blue ice sheeting out across the water, faster than the eye could see. He did not notice the silver veins spreading like tree roots up his arms.

All night they ran, crossing the forest, coating the trees white, peeking into houses as they traced frosty cobwebs on windows, dropping tiny needle sharp icicles from rooftops. All too soon the first red of dawn painted the eastern sky.

They finally stopped in the front garden of Billy's home, surveying their work. The other boy lifted his gaze to the sky then looked at Billy, a question in his eyes. He held out a hand, the thick veins pulsing, filled with work yet to do.

Billy looked at his own hand, at the black nails, at the silver veins leading up his now blue arms. The feather or the hand, that was the decision he must make. He thought of home, of the pain, of the constant fear, of the noise.

Through the front window he could see his father still slumped in the chair. He was smiling and his mouth was closed. He looked happy. Billy could remember the last time he saw that smile. It was winter and he was much smaller than he was now. He had woken in the morning to find that the world had turned white with snow. All that morning he had played with his father, building a snow castle, throwing balls of crushed whiteness at each other, both laughing as the balls hit their targets, exploding into a million white fragments. His mother had made hot soup and he had spent the afternoon basking in the warm glow of happiness.

He turned back to the boy, his face showing his sadness, and held out the feather. The boy moved to take it. Then there was a noise from the living room. Billy turned and saw his father rising out of the chair. The smile had gone and the goblin had turned.

The monster was shouting but Billy could hear only a muffled roar through the windows. He didn't really think about the next action, it was merely his new found means of protecting himself. He placed the feather against the window and thought of the iced-up reservoir.

The goblin stopped, frozen in a shout, as white particles shot across his body. The room turned a silvery-blue just before the icy cobwebs on the window obscured Billy's view.

There were tears in his eyes, tears which froze before dropping with a tinkle to the grass below. He took the boy's hand without looking back, and together they rose into the air, flying, accelerating, into the darker west.

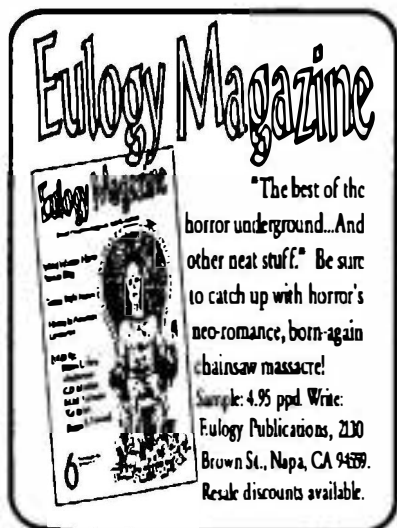
They crossed over the town again, over his house, but Billy gave it no thought. From now on it would always be playtime.



RISE TO WITNESS

Take my hand
and slide into the night sky.
Fly with me
past moonlit clouds
to the black sea
on the dark side of the moon.
Glide silently at my side,
and rise -
rise to witness the white, shining
procession of scattered, sparkling fire.
Bask in the spectral light
of the kings and queens
who are sprinkled throughout the sky,
and let their majestic faces
shine down upon you
from their glinting, distant kingdoms.

William Kopecky
Racine, WI



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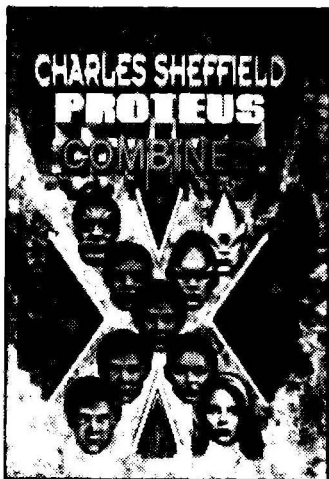
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Publisher's Note This novel was previously published in parts as *Sight of Proteus* and *Protus Unbound* and has been revised for this edition.

William Marden has been widely published throughout the small press, including such fine publications as Thin Ice, Aberrations, Heliocentric Net and over 60 others. He is the author of The Exile of Ellendon (Doubleday) and has served as a professional journalist for over 20 years.

About "Star Light, Star Bright" William says, "There's something about the story, about the implied underpinning of the theme of importance of looking at the universe rationally rather than through romantic eyes, that I hope sticks in reader's minds long after they have read the story." William hails from Orange Park, Florida.

Star Light, Star Bright

by William Marden



ADDY, WHAT ARE STARS?"

David Godbold stopped in mid-sentence in his conversation with Dr. Ernie Coleman and looked at his son.

Neither man was particularly surprised. Five-year-old Tommy Godbold had reached that age when every day brought another question like "Why is water wet?", "Why is the sky blue?", "Why do men and women go into different bathrooms?"

Coleman was relieved in fact. This would be one of the easier questions.

"Well, Tommy, I know this will be hard to believe because they look so small up in the sky like they are tonight, but really each star is a huge ball of hydrogen gas heated to—"

"No, Ernie, No," David Godbold said, casting an angry glance at the steel and glass bubble-structure that surrounded them in an otherwise normal and comfortable two-story house set in the rolling hills of Virginia. Although he couldn't see them, he knew the sentries with their automatic weapons patrolled the woods around them and that every word and action occurring within the bubble was recorded and analyzed.

"He's just a kid, for God's sake," Godbold said. "I don't want him growing up robbed of all the magic of life, knowing conversion formulas instead of fairy tales. No offense, but I don't want him growing up into a cold, analytical scientific type."

"No offense taken," Coleman said, smiling at the man he had grown to know so well in the five years since Tommy Godbold had altered the history of the world. "I know you'd probably rather have him grow up to be a poet or follow in his father's footsteps and be a prize winning photographer."

He looked down at the small, blonde boy standing in front of them hold-

ing a small telescope in one hand and a half-eaten candy bar in the other, and tried with every fiber of his being to cover his emotions with a smile. There was no way the boy could read his emotions, or his thoughts, unless he had already advanced so far that he could fool the monitoring machines and their tests.

"But I can't help feeling that it's better he be given only cold hard facts. There's too much potential for disaster if you feed him any foolish fairytales."

Godbold looked away from his son and whispered so that only Coleman could hear him.

"You act as if he was a damned walking nuclear reactor, Ernie. He's only a five-year-old!"

Speaking before he could stop himself, Coleman said, "Remember what happened to your wife, to Susan? He has too much power, David."

David Godbold shuddered and could not make himself look back at his own flesh and blood.

"It wasn't his fault," he whispered.

"I know," Ernie whispered back. "Every fetus as it's being born feels terror and anger at being torn away from the womb."

He didn't have to verbalize the rest of his thoughts as Godbold looked into his eyes . . . but no other fetus in history ever had the power to tear its mother to shreds and kill every person in the operating room with a thought.

Godbold apparently drove the memories back with a shake of his head and turned to touse his son's hair.

"They're magic, Tommy. Magic spirits gleaming in the sky and if you wish on them, sometimes they will give you what you wish for. Beautiful men and women, more beautiful than you could imagine."

His son's eyes gleamed and a broad smile stretched across his face. "You can get a wish? Boy! Thanks, Dad."

He ran down the hillside away from the patio table where his father and "Uncle Ernie" had sat drinking coffee on a warm Virginia night.

David Godbold wanted to cry watching the boy.

"He's like one of those Goddamned bubble boys that can never leave the bubble," he said. "What kind of life can he ever have tucked away in here behind armed guards and steel and glass. I should never have agreed to this."

Ernie, better known as the world's premier expert on biochemistry and the functioning of the human brain, looked at Tommy who had stopped near the outer wall of the bubble that was his world, and was focusing his telescope on the night sky through a glass panel fifty feet over his head.

"You had no choice David. Even if we hadn't forced you for your's and his sake, you wouldn't have lasted a day outside. Every government, every terrorist group, every 'crazy' would have wanted a crack at him once the news of his powers got out, and they would have. You couldn't stop that kind of news. Remember the time he was watching that movie about the California earthquake?"

Godbold shook his head gloomily. How could anyone forget. Out of nowhere a vast earthquake had rumbled through California from San Francisco to Los Angeles. Nearly 100,000 people had died. Tommy had said he was trying to close the hole in the ground.

No one would ever know exactly how he had done it, but the best guess was that in trying to "close the hole" or seal the earthquake fault, he had somehow triggered vast subterranean forces.

How could one four-year-old boy somehow tap into forces below the

earth and trigger an earthquake registering 9.9 on the Richter scale? Might as well ask how he could reach out with a thought and transport the now-hysterical clown host of a favorite morning kid's show from his home in New York City to Tommy's bubble compound in Virginia - virtually instantaneously.

Remembering those incidents, Coleman said, "He has too much power to be fed nonsense, David."

"He has too much power for us to let him grow into a cold, non-feeling monster," Godbold said. "He has to be a little boy if we're going to give him any chance of growing into a decent adult."

Standing in the moon-drenched shadows far from his daddy and Uncle Ernie, Tommy's vision ranged across the night sky, brilliant gleaming pebbles flashed like the neon lights he had seen in pictures of big cities at night.

A fraction of his mind followed the thoughts and conversations of both men. Some of what they said and thought he understood, the rest was grownup stuff and didn't matter. He could sense the guards around them that Daddy said were there to protect him from bad men. He could read in some way that Daddy couldn't understand the glowing patterns of energy that were radio and television and radar and other things he couldn't put names to.

Below his feet he could feel and sense the shifting patterns of rock down to the earth's core and if he had wanted to he could idly have listened or watched any of the thousands of radio and television signals throbbing through the air around them.

But it was the stars he was absorbed in, now. Thinking of what daddy had said, of the beautiful men and women who lived in the sky, he



made a quick decision. Focusing his attention through the eye of the telescope he selected one gleaming star brighter and prettier than the rest.

In a way he could never describe to Uncle Ernie or the other doctors who came and went, he reached out and closed what felt like his hand around the beautiful star.

Now, it was his and he would show it to daddy and Uncle Ernie and they'd smile at him and be really happy, for a change.

At the table atop the hill where they sat, Godbold and Coleman noticed the nimbus of light playing around the little boy at the bottom of the hill.

For just that last instant that remained Coleman thought that a spotlight from somewhere had been trained on the boy and wondered if the enemy attack they had always feared had finally come.

Godbold was standing up, knocking his chair back, stretching his hand out to Tommy and preparing to yell at him when the air around the two men and then their clothes, their hair, eyeballs, skin, the wooden table at which they sat, the metal chairs, the fabric covered furniture inside the house, the glass, the water in the hot water heater, the wood, and then finally the steel in the guts of the house turned red, then white hot, smoked and vaporized in less time than it took for Tommy to realize something was wrong.

But, by then, the house, the hillside, the armed guards the rolling countryside, the cities, the state of Virginia, the United States and the entire Earth had been transformed into a sea of superheated plasma, as a giant angry star larger than a hundred of the Earth's suns swallowed up the Earth, its planetary neighbors, wandering comets and finally the Earth's sun itself.

If there had been anyone around to notice, the night sky surrounding what had been the Earth was only a LITTLE different - missing only one star which - from a distance - appeared prettier and shinier than all the rest.



THE SILENT TOTALITY

Atlas shrugged -
And nobody noticed.
No one remembers exactly when
But one day the
World went out -
Not with a bang
Nor even a whimper.
I ended
With a single
Dispassionate

--- YAWN.

- Richard King Perkins II
Cicero, IL

1958

Sputnik
up above,

beatniks
down below.

The quest
for knowledge

continues,
despite the

persistence
of gravity.

-- G.O. Clark
Davis, CA

And The Evening

by Michael McNeilley

Olympia, WA

Realizing he was almost running, he slowed to a walk, then stopped and looked out over the sea.

The sun was setting in a blaze of red and orange, over puffy white clouds in a light azure sky, darkening into deep blue above. It would have been beautiful, but he could barely stand to look at it.

Another one, just like all the others. He had told her, from so far out he had said, "If this isn't one, then damn it, there isn't one . . . anywhere." You shouldn't speak your fears aloud, he thought. Even a child knows that. It makes it so much easier for them to come true.

They had tested exhaustively, then run each test again. In disgust, he cranked off his helmet, disengaged the air connections from his suit, pulled the helmet off and threw it onto the sand. The helmet rolled to a stop against a rock.

"You shouldn't have taken that off," his helmet spoke to him from its spot in the sand, in the voice of Gaia, his co-pilot.

"What difference does it make?" his voice was bitter. "I'm not going to catch any diseases now, am I?" He could hear her sigh in the speaker, then click off without comment.

Despite standing orders to the contrary, taking off the helmet made no difference, and there lay the foundation of the problem. The atmosphere was full of oxygen, nitrogen and hydrogen. There was enough methane and ammonia to stink the place up a bit, but breathing was not difficult.

The sea was full of perfectly good water, not too salty yet, but that

was as it should be, for a medium-young planet. The rocks on the shoreline retained some of the jagged shapes that would not be found on an ocean beach in a mature planet of this size. But, one could find plenty of rounded and worn rocks as well, for unfortunately for Jova and his theories, this planet was not all that young.

There should be a profusion of mature plant growth here in the equatorial regions. The seas should be teaming with life, the skies filled with . . . flying somethings . . . anything. But, there was nothing, not even the smallest, most primitive life forms--not anything. As far as could be determined, there never would be. Nothing.

He looked at the helmet, silver against the golden sand. Of course, a secondary purpose of the helmet was to protect its wearer from contamination, but there was no contamination . . . not the slightest chance of contamination. On this planet, as on more than fifty others they'd walked upon, throughout all but endless exploration by their team and countless others, the thing for which they searched was again missing. Again.

"No damn life. Impossible, but no life. Never any life." He sank to his knees, ripping at his suit, pulling his hair. "No damn, damn life."

He pulled the waste packet off its hose and flung it in the sea. He ripped at the cables and valves of the air system, pulled off his sampling kit, threw it down, then jumped up and stomped on it, kicking collection vessels in every direction.

It wore off eventually, the anger, but he left the sampling kit where

it fell. No one would be coming along to discover it, and with this the last stop, he wouldn't be needing it again.

Everything was perfectly in place. A more ideal planetary candidate for life could not be imagined. Carbon-based, organic chemicals galore; long string molecules, aliphatic acids, urea, amino acids, the base structures found in nucleic acids and proteins; all the building blocks of life.

Everything had been in place, as best they could determine, for millions of years, perhaps many millions of years. But no life. Never, never, any life. No greenery on the hills, in the valleys. Nothing, again, like all the other planets, just nothing.

"Jova," Gaia spoke again into the communicator. "Jova. Come on. Let's leave. There's nothing more to do here. We're past schedule already."

Nothing more to do. As if that weren't the problem. Everything was here. Everything was here, and nothing was here, and that was the problem, the usual problem . . . the insoluble endgame problem. Now, nothing more to do here . . . nothing more—anywhere.

Retracing his steps to the ship, Jova looked up as he neared the vehicle, small against the rocky cliffs above the beach. For all its modern technology, the ship's rounded exterior looked much older than the angular cliffs.

His tour was all but over. He would not be going out again . . . chances were no one would go out again. Back home, pressures for government funding were not lessening. Money for chasing off across the cosmos after something that had been all but proven non-existent, would not remain in the budget for long. The thought of the teeming billions back home . . . of the pollution and crowding and corruption . . . of the kind of welcome awaiting his final failure made him want to turn and walk back down the beach, just walk on, but to what, he thought, and to where, and he entered the ship, helmet in hand.

It minutes the ship's contrail

blazed its final message across the sky, a thin and searing yellow line that left a spreading white trail behind as the ship blasted away, toward the end of its voyage, certain never to return.

As the sun moved below the horizon, a last gleam died on the beach, reflected from the lid of a specimen container. Nearby, solid in the heavy motion of the waves, the sharp rocks of the young planet battered against a small plastic pouch. The pouch remained hermetic for a time, the lid tightly threaded, the connections sealed, but tiny cracks began to form in the hard plastic material of the cap. It was not long before the cap cracked apart, shattered, and the packet emptied into the sea.

Tiny intestinal bacteria swam into the primordial soup. Viral nucleoprotein chains, endospores and protozoans floated free.

Minuscule organisms washed upon the rocks, lodging in tiny crevices where the sea waves, pouring over them, would bring the protein chains and chemicals they could break down for their food. Nitrogen-fixing bacteria gathered in shallow tidal pools, with *E. Coli* and fungi. Conjugation and recombination began among some, with the exchange of genes; transduction exchanged chromosomal material among others. All around, cell division spread the news of new arrivals.

Chemosynthetic bacteria began to break down chemicals into bite-sized morsels. Photosynthetic bacteria awaited the dawn of light. With a whip of their flagella, diminutive organisms washed out to sea.

Microbial cells followed their metabolic pathways, spinning and turning in the ocean currents, on a voyage of their own; past now, through tomorrow and into forever. By morning, as the first rays of sun warmed them, already there were more.

And the evening and the morning were the first day.

Bark At The Moon

by Ezra Ochshorn

Seattle, WA

"What?" he said.
"You heard me, loud and clear," she replied. "Bark at the moon."

He blinked and blinked again.
"B-but why?"

"Because I said so. You want the job or not?"

"Sure, but--"

"Then bark."

He sat there, struggling for composure.

Across the table, fingers drummed. "Well?" she said.

He stared out the office window, out into the silent, starless night, considering. It was a power play, plain and simple; rank manipulation, two-bit humiliation. She'd probably suffered similar mistreatment on her corporate climb and in her middle manager's mind the only way to redress years of victimization was with years of victimizing. It was nothing particular against him, she'd do the same to anyone.

While this was an explanation it was not an excuse. He could report her to the company bigwigs, threatening media exposure unless action was taken. That would end this outrageous monkey business pronto. He would feel great, justice having been served.

The only problem was, after her head had rolled and the dust settled, he still might be unemployed. The company would hire whoever they pleased. And, he really needed this job.

"Well?" she repeated.

Damn that stinking mountain of overdue bills! Why oh why did he make all those purchases like the irresponsible consumer he wasn't at heart? He hadn't wanted to buy, buy, buy -- he truly hadn't. Some dark force of nature had made him do it.

And now he was flat broke with no other employment prospects in

sight; not in this city, not in his field. It would take months for him to be re-trained and he had no such time. The collection agencies would no longer accept promises. They were howling for payment -- or blood.

"Look, young man, I don't have all night. There are other applicants waiting. To bark or not to bark: that is the question."

He tried to smile. "Surely the selection of the most qualified candidate can't hinge entirely on--"

"YES . . . OR . . . NO?"

And then, like magic, everything suddenly crystallized. "Yes or no" -- the choice couldn't be simpler. In a flash he knew what had to be done.

Across the table, fingers drummed.

Since infancy he'd harbored a fierce personal pride; it was his most cherished possession. Dignity was everything. Without self-respect nothing else mattered; thus was his supreme credo. Thank God he'd remembered it in time.

Fingers drummed. Both hands.

There comes a moment when every person must risk all to take a stand; his moment had arrived. Damn the job, damn the debts, damn money altogether. Come what may, he would NOT kow-tow. "He Held His Ground" was all his tombstone need say.

She stood up and called out the office door, "Next!"

He leaped to his feet, threw open the window, and stuck out his head. Later, alone in bed, he told himself he'd actually been coughing, not barking.

Matinee

by Keith Dearn
Antalya, Turkey

Mrs. Butterworth arrived back from the corner shop with a large packet of peanuts and a quart bottle of brown ale ready to watch Special Matinee. It was an old Gregory Peck film and she'd forgotten how many times she'd already seen it. Forgotten, too, who the female lead was. It didn't matter. It'd be that Arfa Garden or that Audrey Hipbath or one of that lot. Leading ladies weren't important - Mrs. Butterworth only had eyes for Gregory.

Her living room was papered with pictures of the star, many of them signed. She'd even seen him in the flesh once, getting out of a limousine with a beautiful girl young enough to be his daughter and posing for the cameras before a London premiere. Her nerve-ends tingled at the recollection and a pleasing warmth grew in the pit of her stomach. She turned on the old television and left it to warm up while she opened the bottle. The doorbell rang.

Mrs. Butterworth had not lived with her late husband for nigh on forty years without picking up a few choice epithets, and she employed them. She considered not answering but you never knew - it might be something important. Perhaps she'd won the prize drawn at the supermarket or maybe her daughter-in-law had dropped dead.

She grumbled her way to the front door and cracked it open. On the doorstep stood a small, insignificant little man in a brown suit holding a briefcase.

"Not today, thank you!" Mrs. Butterworth told him.

"No! Wait! I'm not selling anything, honest!" He set down his briefcase and snapped his fingers. Mrs. Butterworth heard a ghostly trumpet climb an ascending scale, the last note held sostenuto. The man spread his arms wide. "I AM SLAGRANE THE

MIGHTY!" he cried.

Nothing happened.

"Sod it!" said the man. "Must have got the intonation wrong again. Happens all the time." Once more he snapped his fingers. Once more the celestial trumpet rose and held. "I AM SLAGRANE THE MIGHTY!" he shouted for the second time.

He stood before Mrs. Butterworth cloaked in white radiance. He had grown to a full eight feet in height. Beads of light dripped from his fingers and slashed on the doorstep. Small lightning flashed from his ears. "That feels better," he said. "Now, madam, I am, as you see, clothed in power. I have come to grant your every desire. Well, most of them. Well, one, actually. You may have one wish of Slagrane and it will be granted. What shall it be?"

Mrs. Butterworth knew her priorities. "I wish you'd piss off and let me get back to Special Matinee!"

The answer did not come from Slagrane. The sweet, deep, soft voice seemed rather to come from the sky. "So let it be!" it said. Slagrane's brightness started to dim and he began to fade, first becoming transparent, then disappearing altogether in little wisps like smoke until nothing remained.

"Afternoon, dear," said Mrs. Halstead from number seven, coming up the street with a large shopping bag.

"All right for some," Mrs. Butterworth replied, closing the door firmly before she could be drawn into conversation.

"Bloody salesmen," she thought as she settled herself in front of the TV screen, already filled with the face of her idol. "Try anything these days, they will!"



The Shining Army

by Frank O. Dodge

Gonzales, LA

What follows is based on an incident alleged to have occurred in the British sector of the Western Front during World War I. I heard the tale when I was a kid in El Paso back in the early thirties from an ex-doughboy who claimed to have witnessed it. We kids were fascinated.

For the past two days we had heard rumors of a massive German push; an all-out assault calculated to smash through our lines and fan out in a pincers movement that would pin us between them and a second wave. It stood a good chance of success. We'd been on the line more than twice as long as the big brains in the rear echelons had established as the maximum time a man could stand the tension, the fear, the constant wet, the cold rations, and the strain without going mad. We were exhausted and emotionally drained. Yes, I gave the Kaiser's boys a good shot at pulling it off.

Rumor had it that the main assault would be against the British on our left as, through God only knows what foul-up, the Limeys had been left without sufficient reserves to replace their casualties. The poor devils had been taking a terrible pounding but you'd never believe it to hear them tell it. It was "thumbs up", "stiff upper lip and all that rot", "keep your chin up Tommy Atkins", and "not to worry, old chap." But I was on the extreme left of our sector and I knew better. I knew that they were stretched pathetically thin, two men...sometimes only one man...covering a three-man space and no chance to stand down to rest because there was no one to replace them on the parapet. To add to the tension Jerry had been making feint and fake attacks that

kept the weary Tommies on the firing step until they were ready to drop.

And we weren't in all that much better shape. If I'd had to bet on it, I'd have laid my money on the Krauts. Since . . . as I said . . . I was right next door to the British, I wasn't completely happy with the situation.

The tension was building all along this stretch of the Western Front. The Germans were masters at the psychological aspects of trench warfare. They let the tension continue to build until our nerves were ready to crack. Hours passed, during which the strategy worked.

We received word that American reinforcements were on the way, but didn't find the knowledge particularly soothing. There's only just so much room in a front line trench and reinforcements only serve to fill the gaps left by the wounded and the dead. On the British sector the gaps would remain unfilled.

The afternoon wore on into evening and what little courage we had left eroded even more as we realized we faced a night assault.

The German barrage, when it started, was almost a relief. We ducked our heads and hugged the wall of the trench while the screaming shells burst all around us. I shivered as I listened to the brunt of the barrage falling on the Limeys forty or fifty yards away. I risked raising my head and was appalled by the pounding they were taking. The Jerry artillery had zeroed in. Shell after shell landed slap in the trench, throwing tons of earth, sandbags, and broken bodies high in the air. They were being slaughtered. They stood to be wiped out to a man.

The stretch of bare, shell-pitted killing ground between the trenches

known as no-man's-land was an arena of eerily shifting lights and shadows as the drifting parachute flares sent up by both sides swayed and danced.

The ear-splitting explosions stopped abruptly and cheers and shouts sounded from the German trenches as a solid wave of field gray uniforms surged over the top and across no-man's-land. There was no hope for the British survivors. They faced what seemed to be a wall of glittering bayonets.

The howling flood of German soldiers was almost upon the British trench when a brilliant glare suffused the area and the air in front of the doomed English . . . opened.

That's the only way I can describe it. A . . . rift . . . appeared and widened to form a vaulting arch. Beyond the arch lay a rolling English countryside bathed in golden sunlight, a crenelated castle in the middle distance. Massed in the entry were mounted knights in plate armor and chain mail that flashed brilliantly as they couched, lances and snapped visors shut. Pennons of every color fluttered bravely and war-chargers pawed the ground impatiently. Row on row of English longbowmen in Lincoln Green or Royal Scarlet stepped to the fore. In union they nocked, drew and loosed a flight of arrows that filled the air with steel-tipped death.

Trumpets blared and the knights charged out of the sunlight and into the mud of no-man's-land. Miraculously none of the horses stumbled on the shell-pocked ground. The mass of advancing Germans was split by the armored charge and many fell, skewered by lance or trampled beneath the iron-shod hooves of the steeds. Into the breach ran the yeoman archers, drawing and loosing with phenomenal speed. Hundreds of the enemy soliders fell, transfixed by the grey-goose shafts of English bowery.

Machine guns chattered, rifles cracked, but none of the knights or bow-

men fell. There were cries and screams of terror from the dying Germans, but the shining horsemen and the English yeomen fought in eerie silence. There was no creak or clatter of armor, no war cries, no pounding of hooves on turf.

In a matter of moments there were only a few dazed German soldiers stumbling blindly about, groping, falling into the water-filled shell holes. The knights gathered about the standard of their leader. The great blue banner with the scarlet Cross of St. George snapped briskly in a wind that wasn't blowing. Trumpeters raised their instruments to their lips and blew a clarion recall. The archers shouldered their bows and marched back through the glowing arch. The knights on their high-spirited mounts wheeled about and followed. The arch narrowed and closed. Gone was the sunlight beyond, and no-man's-land lay in stygian darkness. The only sounds that had been made by the chivalric army had been the blare of trumpets that had begun and ended their assault.

For the space of several heartbeats the battlefield was cloaked in utter silence; no rumble of distant artillery, no click or clatter from any of the several thousand men crouched, awe-stricken, in the opposing trenches. Then the unnatural quiet was rent by exultant yells of British soldiers swarming over the top and charging the enemy ditches. By dawn the entire line had followed them and the Germans had been pushed back three miles.

I was one of the detail assigned to burial duty. I walked uncomplacatingly about the field of last night's battle. The German lay everywhere . . . thousands of them...and not one of them with a wound of any kind.



Featured

Poet

FOLK SINGERS ON KROGA

The melodic graffiti
of decayed civilization,
they understand as well
as anyone the death rattle
of stars, crumbling cities
cloaked by shadows of too
much too soon, oceans
humbled by belligerent suns,
scorched of life,
air nailed to a coffin
of hostile gases, crops and
livestock mutating,
desert staking out its
claim to every breath of landscape
but only they have the
chutzpah to invite us
to clap hands and
sing along with the chorus.

AT NIGHT, SHE CALLS

Sea voice, barely a whisper,
my dreams, not even aware
they're listening, melt into
the music of the waves,
voice shrill as the stars,
siren notes hung from
a melody that
coils around
my subconscious
like a snake.



John
●
Grey

CARBON DATING

The rock is a billion years old,
the flower wasn't here yesterday
and will be gone tomorrow.

Beauty is temporary
but whatever I stub my toe on
lives forever.

PROGRAM

You have to know the program
if you want to make out,
not just the code available
to your particular line of business
but logic stored beyond
what you're expected to know,
the RAM at the heart of all this,
the commands that get things done.
There's files of meaning,
data bases clogged with
implacable truths
waiting for your manipulation.
Unravel the reasoning,
unscramble the code
or you'll fall off the
edge of real power.
The ones that know this stuff
walk this planet like owners
gripping tight leashes
of unseen dogs.
There's only one rule here.
Operate the console
or be one of those dogs.
Don't look at the sky,
listen for the sounds
beneath your feet.
Forget the ones chasing
gods into temples,
saying prayers to the stars.
Just remember
the universe wasn't created,
it was booted.



Jessica Amanda Salmonson is the author of many novels including Tomoe Gozen (Ace), The Golden Naginata (Ace), Thousand Shrine Warrior (Ace) and The Swordswoman (Tor), just to name a few. Recently her short fiction can be found in Jane Yolen's Xanadu 2 (Tor) and Poppy Z. Brite's Love In Vein (Harper & Row). Her poems have appeared in the Datlow & Windling's Year's Best Fantasy and Horror two years running. In addition, she has edited such critically acclaimed books as Amazons! (Daw, recipient of the World Fantasy Award), Heroic Visions I & II (Ace) and Tales By Moonlight I & II (Tor).

"When the Woman Chief Was Young" was founded upon an actual myth set in Crater Lake National Park, Oregon. The story will appear in a trade paperback written by Salmonson called, Phantom Waters, which will be published by Sasquatch Publishing in the Summer of 1995. Keep an eye out for it at your local bookstore, and keep an eye out for Jessica. Jessica hails from Seattle, WA.

When the Woman Chief Was Young

by Jessica Amanda Salmonson



HE CHIEF OF THE KLAMATH nation was wise and valiant. As he grew older, he became a man of considerable wealth. One day he looked

about and saw that he had achieved all life's goals but one. He had no son to be his heir. With heavy heart he asked, "To whom will I teach the ways of judgment and fairness?" In his distress, he sought the counsel of three prophets who knew the ways of divine beings as intimately as the Chief knew the ways of mortals. These wise men put their heads together and spoke with great spirits of sun, earth, wind and water. They perceived that come Autumn, at the time of the wapato harvest, the Chief's wife would bear a child worthy to be his heir.

The following Autumn, a child was born. To the Chief's chagrin, his wife bore a girl.

As she grew, the Chief, remembering the prophesies of his wise men, saw to the instruction of his daughter. She learned to hunt; she rode in battle; she learned the ways of wisdom in mediating disputes and rendering fair judgments. Her name was Chao, the Antelope, though many years later she was called Wolkotska, the Cougar.

She was as lovely as the dawn, and the Klamaths loved her for her courage and kindness. That she went clad in the garments of a hunter only heightened the effect of her beauty. One day she was hunting in the mountains and was seen by Liao, ruler of the demons of Crater Lake and of the world below. From

his lofty throne at the lake's western edge he observed the boyish maiden for a long while, admiring her tracking skills. Everything about her appealed to him, her quill-worked shirt of fawn skin, her mantle of cougar fur, her high beaded moccasins, the colorfully flecked arrows of her quiver. The demon king came down from his rocky throne and said to Chao, "Live with me at the center of the world. You will be wealthy beyond dreams as queen of powerful armies." Chao laughed and refused him. He dared not take her by force, as she gleamed with a personal magic, and she was armed with a bow, sharp arrows, and a knife.

The following day the demon king was seen coming across a meadow toward the Klamath village. They saw his big grey face, his horned ears, his tough sinewy arms and taloned claws, and the people were greatly alarmed. When he smiled, his teeth were not reassuring, and when he hailed the Chief with friendly words, the harshness of his voice was disheartening.

Llao entered into a bargaining with Chao's father and mother. As he was a god, he was able to offer good hunting and fishing, fair weather, and large harvests in exchange for Chao as his wife. In addition, he would provide personal wealth in the form of dentalia shells, obsidian for making spear and arrow heads, copper beads from under the earth, and a great many furs of black otters and white foxes.

The Chief said, "As you can see, my daughter is not like other maidens; she is also my son and will rule the Klamaths when I have gone to the land of the spirits. I do not wish to anger you, yet must ask that you turn your heart to another."

Llao glowered silently for some while before he replied, "You'll regret it," and strode away across the meadow.

On the following Autumn there was a poor wapato harvest, and other roots were just as hard to find. Then came a terrifyingly cold Winter. The game fled to warmer climes and the salmon could not be expected until late in Spring, by which time many Klamaths would have starved to death. The Chief called together the three prophets. They said, "What mortal can oppose the dark god Llao, ruler of the underworld? We must seek a companion, and who better than Skell, king of the skyworld?"

Skell's lodge was beyond the Yamsay River. As it happened, he had one day seen Chao running in pursuit of a deer. She had hunted far and wide to assist her hungry people, and so wandered into Skell's country seeking meat. He fell in love with the huntress at once and followed her secretly to her village.

The deer which Chao carried to her people was insufficient to feed everyone. Skell saw his chance to win his way into her heart. He commanded his eagles to fetch a larger number of hares and bring them to the hungry village at once. When golden eagles appeared from every part of the forest with their offerings, the Klamaths were astonished and delighted. Then Skell came forth and said to the Chief, "My heart aches for your daughter. You did wisely to refuse her hand to Llao, for as his queen she would have lived miserably in the darkness of the world-cavern, worshiped by slavering monsters. At my side, she will become queen of sun and sky. Flowers will arise in the places of her footsteps. She will rule the children of the fox, the deer, and all that dwells in the forest; it shall be as though she were their only mother, before whom all life bows."

The Chief felt despair welling inside him. He had hoped to seek out

Skell as a champion for his people against the malignant Llao, but now he must risk angering even the good god, saying, "Great Skell, once I was without an heir, and I made sacrifices and supplications to the spirits of the sky and earth, wind and water, and you were yourself among the divinities whose intercession I requested. Through my wise men I was promised an heir, and Chao was sent to me. I asked, 'Is it possible the gods have made an error?' and I answered, 'Indeed not; this girl will be my heir.' This being so, how can I send her to live in the sky? I am old and will soon rest forever. Chao must remain with her people, who have already accepted her as my son. As Chieftainess of the Klamaths, she will choose her spouse, and not be chosen."

Skell said, "Well do I remember your prayers and sacrifices, but even gods may err, for each of us has his own design. Little did I know what giving you Chao would mean to me, or for my rival Llao. Know this, Chief of the Klamaths, that for the sake of your daughter, the huntress Chao, there will be war between the upper world and the lower world. When gods do battle, mortals invariably feel the tragic repercussions of divine severity."

T

hereafter Skell took it upon himself to protect the Klamaths from Llao's hostilities. When Llao called forth clouds of icy storms, Skell called forth warm sunlight to soften the stormy blows. When Llao's forces tried to frighten away all the game of the regions, Skell sent troops of game from his own country to sacrifice themselves before the arrows of Klamath hunters. When Llao's underground fiends blighted essential roots and berries, Skell secretly arranged sunlit meadows with plenitude, revealing these sites to Chao.

The Klamaths moved their village to Klamath Lake near which Skell's meadows were discovered, and where Llao's evil influences were weakest. Llao discovered that the fish in this lake were beyond his command. He became increasingly annoyed with Skell for negating his efforts to starve and punish the Klamaths.

One night when his frustrations had reached a pique, the demon king called forth a larger number of his shadowy, monstrous soldiers. They gathered with their king upon Llao's rock, and he said to them, "For so long as Skell lives as the protector of the Klamaths, I will not be able to slay the old Chief and steal away Chao for my underworld bride."

*When gods do battle,
mortals invariably feel
the tragic repercussions
of divine severity.*

For five days they chanted dirge-like war songs and beat huge base drums made from the skins of tattooed men. Demons arrived in increasing numbers from the bottom of the lake and from the black depths of caves, bearing clubs and knives and savage faces, waving their knotted fists, eager for a fight. All this while their king, Llao, breathed forth a fetid smokiness that spread across the land.

At the end of the five days, the world was made to be as dark by day as by

night, as choking as a cedar lodge with its smoke-holes closed tight. Then Llao sent his legions into Skell's country to wreak havoc.

As Skell was a divinity of sunlight, the smoky darkness bewildered him. He called upon his legions of foxes, eagles, mountain goats, elk, bear, antelope and cougars, but all these were made sleepy and befuddled by the incessant night. They feared the smoke as a harbinger of forest fire, and knew not which way to run. Meanwhile, the shades which Llao brought from the underworld roved about the land unchecked. They came to the lodge of Skell and, laughing hideously, dragged him out into the blinding smoke. They bludgeoned him with their clubs, then rent him piece from piece with their dreadful knives. They carved out Skell's immortal beating heart and ran howling and hooting back to Crater Lake in Llao's land of Gaywas.

The conjured smoke dispersed from the countryside. A natural night descended, filled with stars and a fat bright moon reflecting on the cold waters of Llao's perfectly round lake. He and his legions gathered on the throne-rock, screeching hideous victory chants. Then Llao threw the heart of Skell into the lake, where many giant, brilliantly red crawfishes caught it and threw it from one clawed monster to another. They played with the heart of Skell as though it was a ball at a festival game. Llao and his army sat on the rock and along the cliffs cheering and encouraging the moonlit sport of the giant crawfishes.

The game went on all night long. At dawn, the huntress Chao appeared unexpectedly at the eastern edge of the lake, the opposite side from Llao's Rock. She called across the waters in a chiding manner, "How weak you are! Can't you throw Skell's heart any higher than that? The smallest child in my village could throw higher!"

The crawfishes were insulted. Llao's legion chanted to the players, "Throw it higher! Throw it higher!" Skell's heart was given a mighty toss from a crawfish's claw. When another crawfish caught it, Chao laughed mockingly, and said, "Is that so high? Oh, such weaklings!" Each time Chao chided them, the crawfishes threw the heart still higher. Then an eagle streaked across the sky, caught Skell's heart in its talons, sped over the lake's surface pursued by crawfishes, and dropped the heart into Chao's upstretched hands.

The huntress immediately fled with the prize. Llao shouted, "After her! After her!" All the legions chased her through the wilderness toward the land of the River Yamsay.

The huntress was as swift as the antelope for which she was named. The rising sun burned the eyes of her pursuers. Wolves and bears leaped at the demons with claws and teeth, while foxes and deer led them astray. With this assistance, Chao left her pursuers far behind, and came alone to the lodge of Skell. Outside the lodge, Skell's pale lifeless limbs lay strewn about in pieces. His head was upside down by a stump. His torso lay before the door of the lodge. Chao carefully put his body back together, then inserted the heart in his chest, so that the god sprang back to life.

For the span of half a moon, Chao nursed the Sky-God, during which time Llao continued to terrorize the band of Klamaths. The tribe moved from Klamath Lake to little Klamath Lake in their efforts to avoid the demon-king's minions. Throughout this time the Klamaths had no news of their princess and grieved that both she and Skell had been slain in the

war against Llao.

One night the demons of Llao surrounded the harried village at Little Klamath Lake and began to take the people prisoner. They bound everyone with hazel rope and marched them away; the old Chief and his wife they whipped with a cord. Throughout the night they tramped toward Crater Lake; men and women, old and young, all were so dispirited by events and weakened by weeks of poor nourishment that they could do nothing in their own behalf.

When the lake was reached, the people saw against the moonlight the terrible shadow of Llao atop his great rock. In a bellowing, thunderous voice he demanded, "Where have you hidden Chao the Beautiful One, my chosen bride? Reveal her at once, or you shall all be fed to my crawfishes!"

Hearing their name called, the crawfish-monsters raised their beady-eyed faces above the water and created a froth in the starlit waters about them, stirring with their clacking claws. Yet the terror of this vision was not as effective as it might otherwise have been, for the Klamaths realized for the first time, by Llao's own demand, that he had failed to capture or slay their princess! The old Chief stepped forth, his back bleeding from the whipping the devils had given him all along the march. He said, "We have not seen Chao for half a moon. Perhaps she is licking her wounds in some secret place, we don't know. When she is able she will return, and wage an avenging battle against you, like a good son."

The Klamaths laughed and hollered in agreement and began to sing the name of Chao. The devils backed away, disliking the sound of human laughter. It was then that the spirit-canoe appeared in the east of the lake, and in it stood the huntress Chao and the Sky-God Skell. Skell flew out of the canoe and over the lake, landing alongside Llao on the throne-rock. They were shadows against



the moon, locked arm in arm in mortal combat. They fell to their sides still embracing, and no one could tell whose knife it was that glinted on the left, and whose knife glinted on the right.

Chao stepped out of the spirit-canoes and confronted five devils. She unleashed two arrows before the devils ran away, two of them severely wounded. She hurried to her mother and father and untied their hands, and soon everyone was untying someone else. Just as everyone's spirits were highest, they were stunned to hear the thunderous voice of Llao cry out, "Feast, my crawfishes, upon the arms of Skell!"

The shadowy king threw two severed body parts into the lake, which the crawfishes rent into small pieces as the waters grew black with the god's blood.

The dark figure atop the rock bent down to again hack at the corpse. Then he stood and cried out, "Feast, my crawfishes, upon the legs of Skell!"

The monsters caught the falling limbs and began to devour them with rapacious delight.

A third time the Klamaths heard the horrible bellowing. "Feast, my beauties, upon the heart and torso of Skell!" as he threw the greater part of his foe into the rolling waters.

The hearts of the Klamath people were dashed low. The devils, no longer cowered, came forth from the places where Chao had sent them hiding. However, in the next moment, the Klamaths were cheering excitedly, for it was Skell upon the rock! Skell laughed in his own handsome voice, crying out, "Last of all I give to you the head of your master Llao!"

As Llao's head struck the surface of the water, it was transformed into Wizard Island. The crawfishes, in a horror of having eaten their king, sank away into the unnatural depths of the lake, never to be seen again. The devilish warriors along the lake's shore ran forth, planning to avenge their ruler by battling the Klamaths, who were all unarmed save Chao. But, as they ran forward, they began to dissipate in the rising dawn. Their shadowy forms faded into the morning's mist which clung a while to the surface of the lake, then was gone.

It was not long after these events that the father of Chao died peacefully in the fulfilment of his life. His wife's spirit followed after him in due course. For many years thereafter, in the long past age that is today but an echo of a dream, the Maklak clan of Klamaths dwelled among their lakes and the vales, ruled by a noble and wise Chieftainess, whose footfalls in the forest were as light as Wolkotska the Cougar, who was as gracefully fleet-footed as Chao the Antelope, and who was beloved by all her people.

*Don't miss the special subscription
offer on page 58 !*

Micheal Laimo hails from Long Island, New York, where he works as a sales representative. He is also a freelance writer for several local music newspapers, but is new to the fiction scene.

While "The Happiest Man Alive" may seem a little chauvanistic, it's an entertaining take on the old theme of "The grass is always greener . . . "

The Happiest Man Alive

by Michael Laimo

N

ONE WAS HAPPIER THAN Charles Jacobson.

Three years had elapsed, and nothing went wrong for him; his life was a virtual utopia. He was a self made multi-millionaire, yet had never worked a day in his life. Beautiful women flocked to him by the truckload, and which ever one he wanted at any given time, would most certainly be there to comfort him in any way he wished.

Already up \$180,000, he placed \$50,000 on the pass line. Tracy, his favorite lady -- tan, shapely, and of course, drop-dead gorgeous -- held the dice in her right hand. Many players gathered around the table, their hearts beating ferociously.

But Charles was calm. He knew the outcome.

She rolled the dice. Silence. The soft contact of the dice upon the green felt of the craps table could be heard. They stopped, numbers facing up.

The dealer called it, "Yo eleven, winner! Pay the pass line!" The crowd of onlookers screamed, thrilled.

He showed little emotion, for he was used to winning.

"That's it," Charles said to the dealer. "Would you please put that on my account?" The dealer nodded an affirmative. He held an account at every posh casino in Puerto Rico, and was treated with the utmost respect, and given the highest standing. And every now and then, in order to maintain his welcomed status, he would lose on purpose.

He had no explanation as to why he was blessed with this good fortune. He simply knew how to succeed in all areas of pleasure that life had to offer, and accepted the fact that he was born with the special talent to bestow upon himself,

at will, anything within the laws of nature that he desired.

He turned to Tracy and whispered in her ear, "Go get Debbie and Christy and take them to the suite. I'll be there in an hour."

He turned away from her and walked to the bar. He ordered a Tanqueray and tonic.

Oh, what a life, but there was just one problem.

Prior to three years ago, for reasons he still did not understand, he held no memory of his life. Complete amnesia.

It all started thirty-six months ago, almost to the day. Charles awoke on that beautiful Sunday morning in a bed, completely unknowing as to his whereabouts, or for that matter, who he was. He looked up, confused, the sound of ocean waves gently crashing outside his window. Warm beams of sunlight pierced through the atrium skylights above the bed and soothed his skin, but caused a faint sting upon his eyes. He shielded his face with his hands like a newborn sensing natural light for the first time, his mind a dim, blank slate, all experiences new to him.

Soon, after a brief and somewhat alerting encounter with a house servant trying to serve him breakfast, and a self-guided tour of the massive bedroom, the circuits in his brain that controlled his understanding of the English language and his basic know-how to participate and function in society clicked on, enabling him to communicate with those around him.

From that point on, however, he maintained no memory as to who he was and what he was about.

The first thing he was able to ascertain was that he was rich. Filthy rich. The estate was loaded with luxuries, and employed a number of servants ready and willing to kiss his sweet behind. Following a subtle investigation on that first morning, he was quick to determine that everything there was all his own, and gave the housekeeping staff the rest of the day off. Confused, yet strangely excited, he spent that day exploring, trying to discover as much as he could about himself.

Through some bank records and receipts he located in a desk drawer, he found out that his name was Charles Jacobson, and that he was worth nearly \$750 million dollars. How he became this wealthy, he did not know, and frankly, did not care to find out. As far as he was concerned, he just hit the jackpot and would by all means relish the moment, no questions asked.

It would be sometime before the smile left his face.

He discovered that he did not work, and was single, with many girlfriends that worshipped the ground he walked on. A dream come true; instant fame, glory, and riches.

In no time, weeks had passed since his birth (as he coined it), and he never let on to anyone that he suffered from amnesia. Although immensely curious about his past, he feared that he faced the possibility of damaging his character or forfeiting his riches (God forbid!!) if anyone were to know. It wasn't worth the risk. He would just go along for the ride.

And ride he did. Smooth sailing. Throughout the three years, he spent much of his time relaxing at one of his three estates, located in Puerto Rico, Los Angeles, and Manhattan. He cruised the world in his yachts, was escorted around in his private helicopter, and entertained himself with his collection of fast cars. And of course, without protest, all in the company of one or more lovelies.

He was invited to many parties thrown by the rich and famous, and spent most of his nights attending them. When he wasn't socializing with the elite, he relaxed by himself in the comfort and privacy of one of his homes, in the spa or by the pool.

But now, three years later, he felt different, empty. He longed to learn anything about who he was. No one had ever asked him "how business was", or anything for that matter about his past. Conversation about himself was never a topic of interest among his acquaintances, nor did anyone ever allude to the subject. It was as if he never existed prior to three years ago. He always remained quiet, wondering.

More recently, Charles tried to stimulate conversation in the direction of his past. He figured that maybe he would be able to unlock some secrets of who he was. No success. Those whom he questioned either ignored him or simply did not hear him, and continued conversation as if the subject were taboo.

He straightened up and sipped his drink, contemplating, realizing he could no longer continue his life perpetually plagued with this tormenting growth of emptiness. It was driving him crazy.

Tonight, no matter what the consequences, he would find out who he was.

He returned to his suite where Tracy, Debbie, and Christy anxiously awaited his arrival. The three of them were naked, lathering up in the hot tub.

"Charles," Tracy cooed seductively. "I did what you asked of me." She cuddled up next to Debbie.

He walked past the tub into the bedroom, ignoring the temptations offered. He stopped and looked in the mirror. He wasn't ugly, yet certainly not G.Q. material either.

So why would they want me? He stared at his reflection, contemplating the question. He walked from the mirror



and stepped out onto the balcony. He scanned the vastness of the Atlantic Ocean. A tear ran from his left eye, leaving behind a damp impression that expressed a more solid continuity of existence than the life Charles felt he had led.

Tracy, now robed, softly walked up behind him and wrapped her arms around his waist. She rested her chin on his back, silent.

"Tracy," he whispered.

"Yes?"

"Who am I?" A pause.

"What?" Her voice silken.

"Who am I?" he repeated, slightly anxious.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, who am I? What do you know about me?"

"Well," she replied, chin still resting on his back, "You're Charles Jacobson, and simply irresistible."

This was getting him nowhere fast. He raised his voice. "What else?" He turned to face her. "We've known each other over two years; spent a lot of time together. Not once have you inquired about my past! Aren't you the least bit interested in knowing something, anything about me?"

No answer. She backed away, confused.

"Tell me, Tracy, what do you know about me prior to our being together?"

She stared up at him, tears pouring from her eyes. "Well...you're wealthy, kind, . . . and . . .," she stammered, unable to speak.

He continued to probe her, more intensely. "What else? Go on, tell me what you know about my past!"

She sat on the bed and gripped her forehead. She began to sweat profusely. "Please, my head hurts!" she pleaded.

"TELL ME!"

"STOP IT, PLEASE!" she screamed, curling up on the bed.

Charles started to walk toward her, angry.

Then, like an expiring light bulb, she flickered momentarily, and disappeared.

Gone.

Charles jumped back, shocked. He rubbed his tired eyes and looked at the spot where Tracy had been. Something was very wrong.

"Tracy?" He looked around to the floor on the far side of the bed. Nothing. Charles questioned his sanity. Did she just disappear right before my eyes? Poof? He felt faint.

Slowly he walked across the bedroom and entered the bathroom, where Christy and Debbie were bathing. Had been bathing. The two girls were only half there, translucent, frozen in time like two mannequins. Then, just like Tracy, they flickered back to solid, then translucent, then . . . out.

Gone.

Charles became extremely afraid, and ran from the suite, screaming and banging the walls with his fists. He entered the elevator that was, as usual, waiting for him, and rode down.

No one came from their rooms to investigate his commotion. OH . . .
GOD . . .

The elevator came to a halt and informed him he had arrived on the ground floor, casino/lobby.

The doors opened and the casino was empty, devoid of any action.

Everyone was gone. He fought the urge to pass out and slowly moved forward to investigate. The silent environment encompassing him was strange, creating a feeling consistent with that of a lucid dream. It just couldn't be real . . .

Then, the setting around him began to fade.

He screamed, but there was no one around to hear him. He thought of whether or not the tree that falls in the woods makes any noise with no one there to hear it. Well, now Charles was that tree.

And he could certainly hear himself scream.

He ran wildly, arms flailing, passing disappearing slot machines, craps, and blackjack tables. All the bright colors and lights adorning the extravagant hotel faded into dull hues, and melted into nothing as Charles slammed through the front doors.

He thought he was losing his mind. In reality, however, he was getting what he always wanted. He was about to discover his past.

Out in the streets, the bleached environment was at a standstill, as good as dead. Unmanned vehicles sat motionless, gradually evaporating along with everything else. Standing alone in the middle of the road, Charles fell to his knees and grabbed the sides of his head, the fear overwhelming.

He closed his eyes and moments later, when he opened them, everything was gone; buildings, streets, landscapes, the ocean, no longer in existence.

Instead, reality now consisted of a gray void that went on forever.

And Charles Jacobson.

He passed out.

Charles' eyes fluttered open. The light was bright and it would take some time for his pupils to adjust.

Through the halo of light that engulfed him, he could make out a number of figures, maybe five or six, looming over him. A woman was holding his hand.

"Charles? Can you hear me?" she said. He managed a slight nod.

"He's responding!" was one comment he managed to hear through a variety of excited murmurs.

His vision improved and he was able to make out six people, three that appeared to be doctors, a nurse, a young child, and the woman holding his hand.

He looked at the woman, still unable to clearly hone in on her. "Tracy?" he managed to whisper.

Again, murmurs. The woman holding his hand squeezed it slightly. "Charles, who's Tracy?" she asked.

He concentrated on the woman, trying to pinpoint his eyesight on her. She began to come into focus. From what he could gather in his cloudy mind, he had never laid eyes on her before, and as she came into clearer view, he was glad that he never had. She was middle-aged, pushing fifty, sporting an unmanaged red hairdo as bright as a carrot, touched with thick gray hairs that seemed to scream for mercy from the wrath of the red. She was overweight, actually grossly overweight, maybe two hundred fifty -- or, two seventy-five, and her fat breasts pushed the buttons on her polyester blouse to the screaming limit. Her complexion bragged a sundry of irritations and pimples that mixed inappropriately with the smeared lipstick and mascara that had been sloppily applied. Frighteningly and pathetically ugly.

"Charles?" she said again, "It's me, Millie, your wife."

The last two words, for obvious reasons, sent a jolt of fright through him. His eyesight and lucidity came around quickly.

"What?" he said, disbelieving.

"And this is your son," she said referring to the young boy next to her. "Charles, Jr."

The first thing that crossed his mind was the evil horror of actually having sex with this . . . thing. No way, not him. He panicked and tried to sit up. A doctor came over. "Charles, please, sit back, do not exert yourself. It has been along time."

Charles grabbed his hand. "Been a long time? What are you talking about?"

The doctor paused, concerned. Then he spoke. "Mr. Jacobson, this will come as a shock to you, but . . . you've been in a coma for almost three years, almost to the day as a matter of fact."

Charles looked straight ahead. "Three . . . years?"

"Now, I can understand your shock," the doctor continued, "but let me assure you that you have indeed come out of it in remarkable health. You even seem to have gotten a tan; your skin color is quite healthy looking." His smile widened. "It pleases me that I can honestly say, that after a few tests you will be able to return home to your wife and son in a matter of weeks. Maybe even days."

Charles put his head back on the pillow. Then, he looked at his wife. She smiled her fat, pimply face at him.

He looked at his son. Goofy looking kid.

"Oh . . . God . . ." was all he could muster before he passed out.

THE SIFT

I am pearls unworn for some time,
depleted in shine but worthy
of your screen wired mesh.

Your task is to reconnect
what brought me here
rather than to recompose myself:
a filmy haze of shattered asteroids,
former components of a whole
and temperate planet.
If you find the soil obstinate,
it is because I hold it fast,
sheltering me and these
far flung particles of self
from a cold and distant sun.

Margaret Smith
Lowell, MA

THE EDGE

you
draw from, where only light
had been. i,
oddly illuminated,
wait, unfolding, unfurled like
surrender. not truth,
not lies, that moment.
you
pull life up to
the void, peer over.
i
am the edge, cutting,
bring pain where nothing lived.
you,
gentle man, smile.

Lee Grundish
Toledo, Ohio

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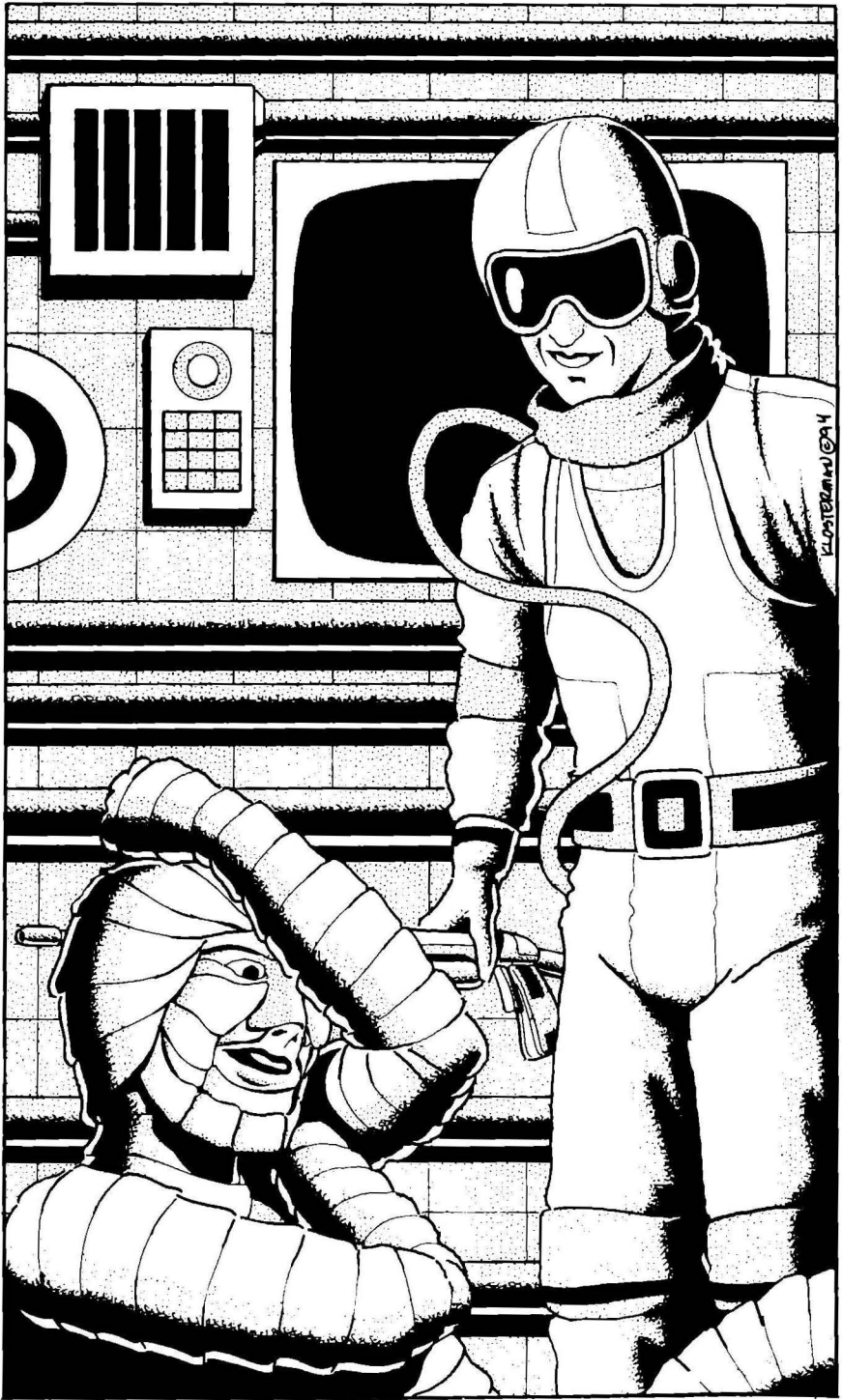
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James Dorr is well known for his writing in every major genre. His work has appeared in Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, Aboriginal, Pulphouse, New Mystery, Cemetery Dance, Borderlands II (Avon), Mindsparks, Harsh Mistress, Space and Time, and hundreds of others. His poem "Dagda" received an honorable mention in the Rhysling Award competition last year. Other honors include three honorable mentions in the Datlow and Windling Year's Best Fantasy and Horror last year and four the year before. His story "Subterranean Pests" was featured in L. Ron Hubbard's Writers of the Future Vol. 9 (Bridge). He has upcoming work in Elric: Tales of the White Wolf (White Wolf), Grails: Quests of the Dawn Vol. 1 (Roc) and Dark Destiny (White Wolf).

About "Nuclear Fusion" James writes, "The story came out of speculation about social conditions aboard a permanent space station (note: "Nuclear Fusion" was written before either Babylon 5 or Deep Space 9 appeared on TV) that plays host to various alien races as well as humans." James lives in Bloomington, IN with his cat Fang (or Maο Hsiu-shih - depending on its mood).

Nuclear Fusion

by James Dorr



HE LASER PINGED, BURNING A streak into the corner above my left shoulder. I hit the pavement.

It pinged again. Lower. I scrambled backward. Once behind cover I checked the solvent tank on my back, then glanced toward the damage the laser had done. Wall damage only.

That'd mean work for Joran's robots — the wall repair techs. Mine kept the station's walkways clean and, given the dirt that accumulates at a free transfer port, they had quite enough to take up their time without laser stains too. In fact, I'd been heading out to the rim to check the next shift to make sure their own cleaning tanks were full, when the shots had burned past me.

A third ping, and this shot did streak the walkway. I was going to back around farther to the next corner — take an alternate radial out — but making sure the streets were kept clean was my personal duty. One of the few laws we had on a station where alien races, often with wildly conflicting cultures, were forced to coexist dewlap to jowl, was that things had to be kept clean and working. The way I saw it, shooting the pavement violated that law.

I was unarmed myself — by courtesy I should not have been a target either — but I did have my tank and hose and my own emergency cleaning nozzles. I selected a needle-beam spray, twisted it on, and jumped out, makeshift weapon fuming.

My attacker, his features masked by humanoid armor, had just jumped out too. Spray hit the hot casing of his weapon and burst into steam. The hand-laser dropped, along with two fingers.

I pushed the call button on my belt to get a scooper robot on the scene pronto, then charged my assailant. A fist to the jaw turned his face to jelly.

Literal jelly.

I caught my assailant's drooping form and carried it to an organic park strip where any spills would be self-absorbed. He was coming to — the chitin-like substance I'd thought was armor was already starting to regain its stiffness. I propped him into a sitting position and, still not having a proper weapon, waved my cleaning hose at his chest.

*A fist to the jaw turned his
face to jelly.
Literal jelly.*

"No shoot again, comrade," the creature said. "I just honest amoeboid freelancer, wearing cytoplasm membrane in humanoid form to get along better. I working for captain of big space vessel, hoping to earn passage back to home planet

I sympathized with him — with her, it, whatever it is you call

amoeboids. I had had a home planet once, but the station was home now. More precisely, Rim Sector Fifteen was the only place I could really call home and, regardless of the amoeboid's bad aim, it was where I expected I'd end my days. I sympathized with him, but only a little.

"You shot at me, buster," I replied. "You broke the law when you messed up the station. How is that honest?"

"Honest job, comrade. Have chit for insurance to cover cleanup. All in order. You name Andrew Seldon?"

I nodded. "Yes."

"Please stop point dangerous gun thing at me. You go out with lady, name Martha Edwards, for fancy dinner yesterday night?"

"A sales representative, yes. She works for a cleaning materials company on Garrison Blue. She'd been showing me samples — in fact, the solvent I have in my tank now is a new product she wants me to use on a trial basis . . ."

Then it hit me. "Dulcie?" I asked.

"Lady name Dulcie sign contract, yes. Tell my ship captain she want you shot up because you go out with other female. She use different word though, comrade. You want see papers?" I shook my head.

Dulcie, I thought, the forever jealous. I'd told her before I'd gone out with Ms. Edwards that it would be strictly a business dinner, but Dulcie was also forever forgetful. Dulcie loved me, but — more than just love — she burned with a fire of obsessive suspicion. She loved me, yes, but this wasn't the first time she'd tried to kill me. The hell of it was . . . "Where is Dulcie?" I asked the amoeboid.

"You want make contract for revenge? Ha-ha! That funny. Joke on Dulcie lady, however. I honest spacefarer, tell you no have to pay me for that. Matter already taken care of." The hell of it was that I loved her too.

"Where is Dulcie?" I thrust the tank nozzle into its holster, grabbed the amoeboid's shoulders with both hands. "If any harm has come to her . . ."

"She no harm. No have to hurt me — I truth-telling spacefarer. She only kidnap. Captain of humble amoeboid think maybe, since she can afford expensive contract, she have more money that others give over to get her back. In fact, had hoped maybe, if only wound you instead of kill, you might have idea of

who make best offer.”

I'd had one idea. I told the amoeboid we'd make a sling to put my right arm in — pretend I was wounded. I thought I'd retrieve his laser gun, just in case, and use the sling to conceal it as well, but when I went back to where it had fallen I found that the scooper had beaten me to it. Nevertheless, assuming his fellows' hideout was nearby, I'd gone ahead and ordered him to lead me to it, then fade into the plastic-work fast as soon as we got there.

What I hadn't counted on was that the place they held Dulcie was not nearby. It wasn't even near the rim.

It wasn't exactly helpful either that my guide was ignorant of the station's layout. After we'd threaded our way through various streets and back-radials for more than an hour, I was the one to figure out, from the lowering gravity, that we were heading in toward the hub.

“That what you call it?” he said when I asked him. “Only know what space captain tell me. Just that I supposed to take roundabout, up and down route in case I followed.”

“Your space captain — is his ship docked at the hub? Is that where he's got Dulcie?”

“You good guesser, comrade, but not quite right. Space captain say humans have messy habits, no want on spaceship. We go to building that captain say called 'Rosa's Saloon.' Have room in back. You know this place maybe?”

I shook my head and let him lead on. The truth was, I'd rarely been out of the sector I lived and worked in — scarcely ever been up to the hub. We humans are neighborhood dependent, in spite of the fact that we've conquered the stars. It doesn't really show until you get to a place like a freeport station where, all of a sudden, there's so much strangeness you need a small place you can call your own. It may be a matter of just a few blocks — with some people it could even be just a single room — but, unless there's a pressing reason, you don't want to leave it.

Dulcie was pressing reason enough, though. Even if she hired people to kill me, I still loved her. And she was in danger. I waved my tank nozzle at the amoeboid — for whatever reason, he seemed to fear that as much as my fists — and told him to hurry.

“Understand, comrade. You want we take short cut? Space captain say, if sure I not followed and really in hurry, there alternate way I can . . .”

“Move it, buster.”

I tried to remember what I knew about amoeboids. It wasn't much. They generally reproduced by fission, but only after exchanging genetic matter by fusion, the same as some microscopic amoebas do back on Terra. Also, just like their Terran counterparts, they consisted of single nuclei surrounded by a thick protoplasm, except that the outermost layers of this, which they could change the shape of at will in response to environmental pressures, had to take on a chitin-like extra stiffness in proportion to their masses. Beyond that, amoeboids were known to be honest, at least in terms of the spoken word — that was what was important now, that this one could be trusted — although mercenary and sometimes prone to what outside observers might still consider shadowy deals.

They also tended to be literal minded. That, I decided, was why it took

my specific urging for him to even remember that he might know a short cut. In any event, we took a steadily uphill path now, and the gravity change was becoming more and more apparent with each new step.

In time, we could almost swim through the air, propelling ourselves upward handhold by handhold. We entered a tunnel, then a broad, cylindrical courtyard. Filling the courtyard was a jungle of signs and arrows. One of the signs said “Rosa’s Saloon.”

We walked — floated — through the hatchway. Heads and pseudopods, mostly the latter, turned at the bar.

“This mostly amoeboid joint,” my guide whispered. “That right word, comrade? Feel uncomfortable with form like yours.”

I knew what he meant. Most of the patrons — I wondered if there was ever a real “Rosa” — were shaped like insects of various sorts, although some looked fishlike. Both were practical forms for low-G. A few went for geometrical shapes. But all were starting to leave their various booths and cradles and drift toward me.

“Maybe I go now, okay, comrade? That what you tell me when we start. That I fade into plastic.”

“Not so fast, buster,” I whispered back. “Not until you’ve shown me the back room.”

“This way, then, comrade.” He helped me shoulder my way through the crowd, then opened a port at the end of the bar. Inside was Dulcie.

“Andrew?” she said. She rubbed her eyes, as if just waking up from a nightmare, and, as I reached the room’s center, she pushed off from the corner she’d been huddled in and ran into my arms.

“I’ve come to take you home,” I answered and kissed her.

“Oh, Andrew,” she said. “You’re still alive! I’m so . . . so sorry I tried to kill you. I . . .”

“It’s all right, Dulcie.” I kissed her again, then took her hand and turned to lead her out through the main room.

“Not so fast, matey,” a new voice hissed. I looked up to see a torpedo-shaped form, with chitinous barracuda-like teeth and a captain’s hat, that had swum in behind me.

“It’s not all right, Andrew,” Dulcie continued. “I’m so forgetful. You told me your dinner with that . . . that woman would only be business. But when my friends said they’d seen you together, well naturally I just . . .”

I put my arm around Dulcie’s waist and backed up slowly as other shapes pushed in behind the torpedo, insects and sharks, with teeth of their own. “I . . . uh . . . beg your pardon?”

“What I mean, Andrew, is I get so jealous. I think the worst things. I know I shouldn’t. I . . .”

“It is I who beg your pardon, matey. I skipper of crewmen who capture this lady. You come to give ransom?”

“I’ve come to rescue this lady,” I said, beginning to realize that I might have made a mistake rushing in so quickly. Insects and fish were swimming around us, forming a globe we couldn’t escape from. Nevertheless, I faced the torpedo. “I demand that you let her go free. I . . .”

“Ha-ha! Is funny joke, yes? You not give us ransom, matey, you be captive too.”

“I really mean, Andrew, it’s just that I love you. I love you so much, it



makes me forget about little things . . . you know . . . details like letting a contract on you? In fact . . . I think there's something else I ought to remember. If only those things would stop swimming around us so I could concentrate . . .”

Little things . . . details. I tried to remember, to concentrate too. Fingers that fell to the pavement when I shot spray at the laser. The tank on my back. The amoeboid's fear.

“Dulcie! Listen. Close your eyes tight.”

“I know there's something else I should remember . . .”

“You pay ransom now?”

Then I remembered the new cleaning solvent I'd agreed to take as a sample. I selected a wide-beam nozzle, clicked it to mist-spray, and twisted it on. I closed my own eyes as it fumed around us.

“What this stuff, matey? I . . . oooh-h-h-h-h-h!”

I heard moans and thrashings. I twisted the spray off and opened my eyes to the sight of the captain and the others, their form-protecting membranes dissolving, their protoplasm, unconfined in the near-zero G, spreading out into tendrils.

Their nuclei melding.

I pulled Dulcie with me out past the bar, then sprayed again as other amoeboids clustered around us. “Orgy in the back room!” I yelled as we forced our way through them. I'd have to send the rest of the solvent back to Ms. Edwards, I thought as we broke free into the courtyard. It seemed to be a trifle caustic for station use, at least when amoeboid ships were in hub, but I had some ideas about where she might be able to sell it.

“Andrew, what's happening?” Dulcie had opened her eyes as well now. “I . . . I was trying to remember something — something important — but then those creatures . . .”

W

onderful, even if flighty and . . . yes . . . scatterbrained and mistrustful Dulcie, I thought when we got back to Sector Fif-

teen. She'd known very well what had been going on when the amoeboids' chitin dissolved and their nuclei blended. In fact it had given her an idea about how we could celebrate her rescue. "We'll have dinner first, of course," she suggested, her voice rising in its usual way when she wanted to make sure I'd gotten her point. It was good to be home.

Even before we went out to eat, though, I still had to check in with my shift. Fortunately, the robots were semi-automatic and had already gone out to their jobs. I dropped off my solvent tank and nozzles, then topped their refill hopper off with the usual solvent in case any came back with their own tanks empty. Then I kissed Dulcie.

"A moment to change," I said as we walked, hand in hand, up the radial to my apartment. "You wait outside here." I took out my key.

"Andrew?" she said.

"Just a moment." I thrust my key into the door dilator. "I love you, Dulcie."

"I love you, too, Andrew. But I just remembered. Before I talked with those amoeboids about shooting at you, I'd called up someone . . ."

"Uh-huh," I said. I twisted the key.

". . . someone from the bomb squad . . ."

I turned and dived, taking Dulcie with me. We hit the pavement just as the blast went off over our heads.

". . . I am sorry, Andrew. Really, I am. But you know how jealous I get sometimes. . . ."

I kissed her as we lay on the pavement. Sometimes I wondered why I still loved Dulcie, but, when she kissed me back, I remembered. We picked ourselves up and, dinner forgotten for the moment, we walked together, arm in arm, through the smoking doorframe.

Afterwards, when we did go out, I noticed that the blast damage had been high — confined to the walls. I shrugged with relief.

That, at least, would be Joran's crew's problem.

DD

pirate writings

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Christopher Hivner hails from Dallastown, PA. He enjoys collecting medieval weapons, studying medieval history and watching bad science fiction movies.

"I believe there are other life-forms in the galaxy," writes Christopher, "... and I would like to think that there really is a man on the moon as the fairy tale says."

The Man On the Moon is Dead

by Christopher Hivner



He was dead. He hadn't answered the calls all day, and he always acknowledged immediately. Terry sat back and cried, searching in desperation

for a way to help his friend, but it seemed it was too late. Terry knew it was coming, but it still racked him emotionally. After 5 million millennia, how could the man be dead?

Terry hadn't slept in days, never far from comforting his friend, trying to will him to live. He was exhausted and dirty, but didn't seem to care.

Someone should be notified, he thought. There was a responsibility to honor him. Terry reached for the phone to call someone for help, but stopped. He had called the police three days in a row and been ignored. Why wouldn't anyone listen to him?

Didn't everyone believe in the man on the moon?

Sergeant Jerry VanOffer turned on the shortwave radio and fiddled with the dials until he found the signal from the space shuttle. Another mission had launched a few days earlier and he wanted to eavesdrop. He leaned back in his chair to relax as he listened to the conversation coming from thousands of miles away. The radio crackled and the space shuttle made another transmission to Cape Canaveral. Jerry didn't notice his partner Zak as he entered the room.

"Why don't you just read about it in the papers like everyone else?" Zak sat down and yawned. He was about to start typing when the station door flew open. A small middle-aged man stumbled to the desk, taking breaths in gulps. Zak

rose cautiously and walked toward the man.

"Can I help you?"

"He's dead," the man said, tears filling his eyes. His hands clutched the desk so hard his knuckles seemed on the verge of snapping. Sweat rolled down his face. His hair was oily and disheveled and his body odor made Zak step back.

"Who's dead?" Zak asked.

"I don't know why I'm here now except I don't know where else to go. If you had helped earlier when I called, he might have survived. Now he's dead."

"Why?"

"I talked to him yesterday and he was worse than before. I didn't know how to help. Today he didn't answer when I called."

"What's going on?" Jerry asked as he walked over next to his partner.

"I don't know," Zak replied through closed lips. Zak spoke very slowly. "You have to calm down. Who's dead? A friend? A relative?"

"He was a friend."

"Where does he live?" Jerry asked, grabbing a pad and pencil.

"The moon."

"OK," Zak said under his breath. He whispered something to Jerry and turned back to the distraught man. "Why don't you have a seat, and we'll call someone who can help."

"Don't you listen to anyone? I called the last three days for you to get help. Now it's too late."

Jerry slipped Zak a note and went back to the shortwave set. Zak read: *Called the hospital, be here in an hour. Keep him talking and calm. Zak licked his lips and crumbled up the paper.*

"Can you tell me your name, sir? I'm Zak."

"My name is Terry."

"Terry, does your friend have a name?"

"No. He didn't need one."

"Why is that?"

"He was the only one. There was no one to interact with."

"How did you contact him?"

"With one of those." He pointed to the shortwave in the corner.

"So you have a radio and you could get in touch with this man?"

"Our first contact was by happenstance. I sent out a signal. Morse code for 'hello'," said Terry.

"This man who lives on the moon answered you?"

"Yes," Terry answered curtly. He finally realized that Zak was humoring him and it made him angry. "We spoke nearly every day for months and he told me he thought he was dying. He sent out a distress beacon a few days ago. I told him I would do what I could down here. I didn't know who to call so I tried you, hoping you could get in touch with someone in authority. But for three days my calls went unanswered. I won't be bothering you anymore."

"Wait . . . Terry. We're trying to help you."

"You don't even believe me! This man existed! He was created with the birth of the universe and lived for five billion years! Can you fathom all that he saw and experienced in his lifetime? No, you can't. It was this man who became my friend."

"I'm not trying to belittle you, but this is all hard to believe."

"Let me use the radio."

“Wait.”

Terry walked behind the desk and Zak grabbed him by the arm.

“Please,” Terry said pleadingly. Zak relented and motioned to his partner. Jerry stood and let Terry sit down. Changing frequencies first, Terry danced the dial, searching for the signal his friend had sent out. His hand stopped. He turned up the volume and looked back at Zak.

A shrill ping, emitted in a specific pattern, repeated over and over again. Jerry raised his eyebrows in surprise.

“It’s Morse code, an SOS,” he said excitedly.

“Can you tell where it’s coming from?” Zak asked.

“I can send my own message and see if they answer.”

“I’ve been calling all day and he doesn’t respond. He always answered right away,” Terry said sadly.

“Try,” Zak said to Jerry. Terry rose reluctantly, frustrated that he had no way of truly convincing them. He was the only one who knew and no one else would ever believe him. Unless another expedition to the moon was undertaken, his friend would lay alone and unknown.

Terry backed away from the shortwave and headed for the door. The officers were too busy to notice him leaving. Terry disappeared into the night.

Jerry had gotten no answer to his repeated messages sent to the SOS beacon. It was nearly a half hour before they noticed Terry was gone.

“Who do you think that guy was really talking to?” Zak asked Jerry.

“I’d dearly love to know.”

“You seem a little obsessed by this all of a sudden.”

“I’ve never picked up anything on this channel but communications from space.”

Zak looked at his partner, but Jerry was staring trance-like at the radio. Zak tapped him on the arm and Jerry turned.

“Do you believe that guy now?”

“What? That the proverbial man on the moon really exists?” Jerry laughed, but it was an uneasy release. “No, I can’t buy that story. But I’d like to know where that signal is coming from . . . and who sent it.”

Jerry sighed and turned back to the space shuttle signal, but not before writing down the coordinates of the mysterious beacon. When he found the shuttle signal, there were excited voices shouting.

“Kennedy, this is Discovery. We’re picking up a strange signal. A distress call.”

“Discovery, this is Kennedy. Can you determine where it’s coming from?”

“Attempting to now. The signal is very strong. I don’t think it could be coming from Earth. I think it’s out here somewhere. It’s nearby.”

“Discovery, you’ve got to be sure. How could that be possible?” There was no immediate answer. “Discovery, do you read?”

“Kennedy, this is Discovery. The signal has suddenly stopped. We couldn’t get a definite fix on it.” There was a pause. “It’s gone. The signal has stopped.”

Small Press

Magazines:

Aberrations, Adult Science Fiction, Fantasy & Horror, P.O. Box 460430, San Francisco, CA 94146. \$3.50 single, or \$31.00 for a full year subscription (12). Issue #17 of this fine magazine sports a one color cover, 64 pages of art, poems and fiction by some of today's rising stars. #18 includes fiction by Sean Doolittle, Charlee Jacob and Ken Goldman. Both these issues are packed with fine art that gives this magazine a very comfortable feel. If you haven't seen this adult Science Fiction, Fantasy & Horror 'zine, drop them a check. It's worth the \$3.50.

Kracked Mirror Mysteries, Frontier Publications, 370 E. Woodlawn, Le Center, MN 56057. \$4.00 single, \$11.50 one year subscription. Make checks payable to Debbie Gish. The debut issue of this magazine is very impressive. It has a unique layout and style that sets it apart from the other small press magazines. I particularly liked "Bottom Waltz" by G.F. O'Sullivan. A twisted and morbid tale about a lake that holds many secrets. Other contributor's include Michael Thomas Dillon, Edward J. McFadden, William Cissna and many others. Issue #2 is even better than #1! It contains fiction by Carter Swart, David J. Pettigrew, Edward J. McFadden, Jim Lee and many others. This magazine is definitely on the rise.

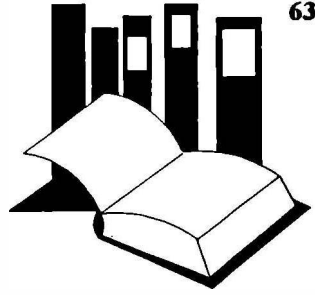
Harsh Mistress: Science Fiction Adventures, 80 Lunt Drive, Greenfield, MA 01301. \$4.00 single, \$15 for one year (4). Issue #2 contains stories from such leaders in the field as the Hugo-nominated Allen Steele and Hal Clement. Other exciting authors include Don D'Amassa and D. Lopes Heald. Every issue promises to bring you established writers as well as the brightest new names. With the new full sized, perfect bound format, **HARSH MISTRESS** is the only magazine of its kind. You won't want to miss one action packed issue of this new semipro magazine. (Note: This magazine will be changing its name, keep an eye out.)

Space & Time: 138 W. 70th Street (4B), New York, N.Y. 10023-4432. \$6.25 single, or \$10 for one year (2). Make checks payable to Gordon Linzner. This long-time small press magazine never disappoints. #83 includes fiction by Charles M. Saplak, Sue Storm, Kat Ricker and many others. Sue Storm's tale fails to excite, as she rehashes ground she has covered many times before. Saplak's tale, "You Can Go in Now" is very good and I also enjoyed "The Queen Machine" by Simon McCaffery. All-in-all, this is a very strong issue with some great art and several fine poems. As usual, well worth the money.

Cyber-Psycho's A.O.D.: P.O. Box 581, Denver, CO 80201. \$4.00 single, \$15.00 for one year (4). Make checks

Dispatch

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payable to Jasmine Sailing. Issue #5 of this surreal magazine is packed with strange adult fiction by Bruce Boston, Gregory G. Nyman, Don Webb and others; some fine art and reviews on the music scene, as well as several poems.

Chapbooks:

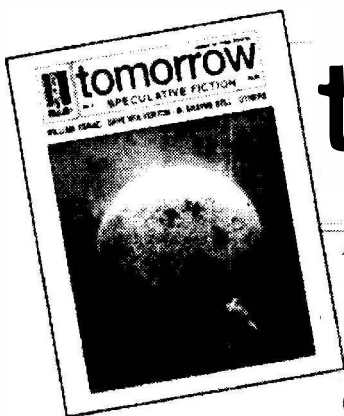
Breathing Ashes: Poems From the Fire, by Danya D'Arcy. Available from Strait-Jacket Publications, P.O. Box 21, Cleveland, MN 56017-0021. Price:\$3. This is an impressive book of poetry that challenges the imagination. My favorite poem was "under the deuce". The book also contains many fine illustrations.

Moorhaven Fair, by Richard Novak. Available from Pirate Writings Publishing, 53 Whitman Ave., Islip, N.Y. 11751 Price:\$3. This fine book of fantasy poems is a collection of compiled poems that have appeared all about the small press. My favorite is "Moorhaven Fair". Don't miss this one.

The POE Pulpit: by various writers. Available from Pirate Writings Publishing, 53 Whitman Ave., Islip, N.Y. 11751. Price: \$3. This fine chapbook has a two color cover and is filled with nine stories and five poems in the tradition of Edgar Allan Poe. Favorites include: "Postmature Burial" by Chris Pourteau and "The Corridor Between" by David Schindler.

Big Books

Songs of Chaos, by S.N. Lewitt. Available from ACE Books. Price \$4.99. S.N. Lewitt has created a truly bizarre world that stretches the imagination and dazzles the senses. The main character, Dante Mecall, is the product of an experiment gone wrong, an outcast on Earth were the genetically perfect are ruled by a tyrannical Eurostate that is hunting him and attempting to drive him from their perfect world. In a desperate attempt to escape, Dante finds himself in a society that not only makes him seem normal, but helps him embrace the very genetic inconsistencies that have hampered his existence. Through a well developed plot and factually exciting history, Lewiit brings tears as well as smiles. The book looks closely at the human spirit, at who humans are, at what makes the past more important than the present. Other than saying that this book is a must read for all fans of Science Fiction, I can only sum up with my favorite quote from its pages. ". . . we know it's a party and we're going and we're bringing the beer." Don't miss this one. Lose yourself in the Somba!



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