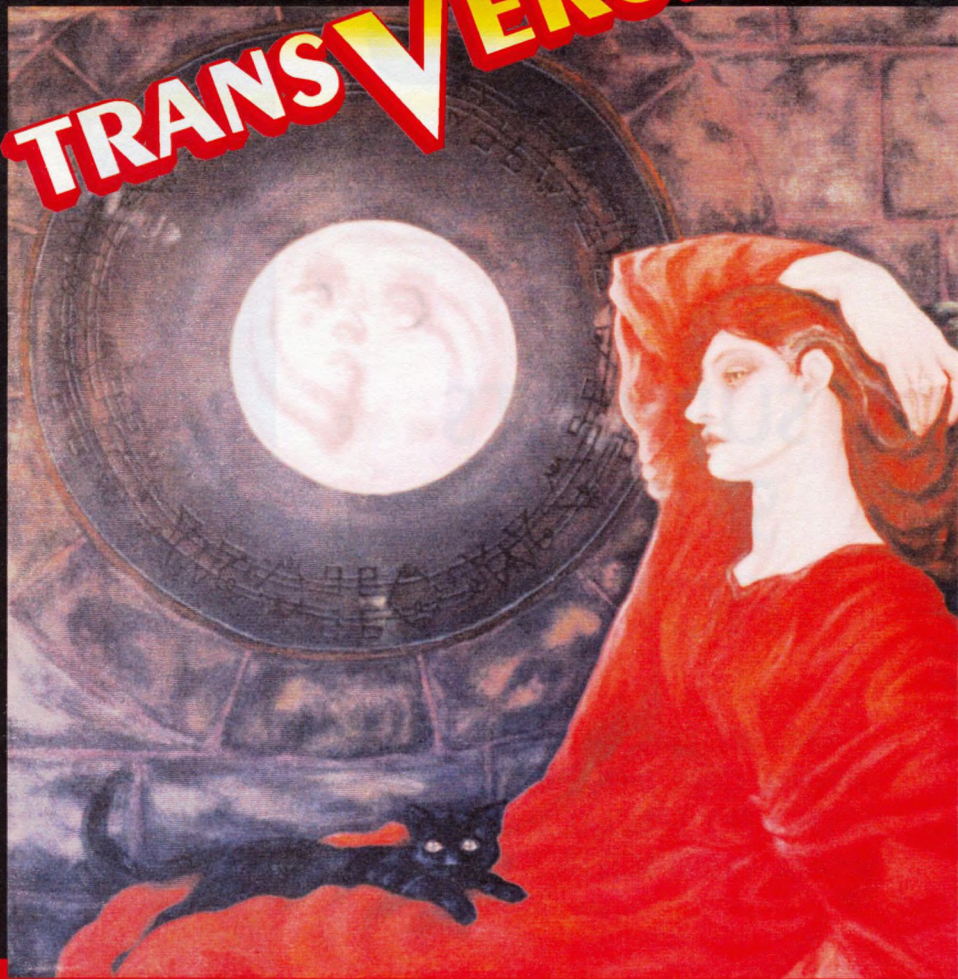


VOLUME 1 NUMBER 4

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TRANSVERSIONS



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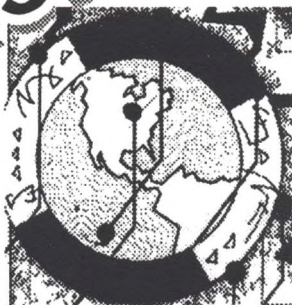
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TRANSVERSIONS

#4



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EDITORIAL - DALE L. SPROULE

I'VE ALWAYS THOUGHT THAT EDITORS who say they don't want to see any particular type of story are turning down great stories sight unseen. I was sure that if I edited a magazine, I would *never* specify anything I didn't want to see. I believed in this so strongly that we refused to give out content guidelines for the first few issues.

Then, a few weeks ago I checked out the *TransVersions* guidelines in Randy Dannenfeler's *Market Report* on Compuserve. It says *TransVersions* "wants more DF & H, but not hitchhiker, evil twin, werewolf, vampire or gallons-of-bodily-fluid stories." I had to ask myself how a statement like that could have come from *me*. But admittedly, it did in dribs and drabs.

It started with international postage which – being in Canada and receiving many US submissions – was something that we should obviously talk about in some sort of guidelines. And we could say all the usual things like use clean paper and please double-space, because these things seemed professional. Then it occurred to us that just to be fair, we should warn writers about our bias against hitchhiker stories.

Over the course of time, it got condensed to "dislikes hitchhiker stories". Sally was getting grossed out by the proliferation of bodily fluid stories we'd received. So they got added to the list. Then somehow, werewolves, vampires and evil twin stories...(I plead insanity). Somehow, we found ourselves saying things we don't really mean. If writers send us the above types of stories, they will be judged more rigorously than stories filled with wild new ideas...but please don't stop sending them to us. If you find a new or compelling enough way to tell any type of story it is fair game. One story that came to us had rivers of blood and we'd have bought instantly (it got away). And we've both read any number of vampire books and stories in the past year that we liked. Of course, none have come our way, because we don't like vampire stories.

Stop right there. That's a lie! ...and we're the liars.

From now on, don't ask yourself what we *don't* want. Ask what we *do* want. And what do we want, you ask? Stories which have an sf/f/h sensibility that are ambitious, literary and unabashedly...bent in some fascinating and hopefully exciting way. Stories that are simultaneously stylish and entertaining. A story's resonance is very important to us. We want stories that are great the first time we read them and even better the second time. Next time you read *TransVersions* guidelines, wherever they may be, remember: everything we say is true. Yet, our guidelines are full of lies.

EDITORIAL - Sally McBride

DALE AND I HAVE BEEN INVITED TO TEACH a workshop next summer in our branch of genre fiction; i.e., the kind of fiction you'll find in these pages. Being offered the chance to teach the sort of fiction I love to read and write is both flattering and frightening. My first fear was: How will I find enough useful information to fill five days? After a little thought, my next was: How am I going to compress all the things I'd like to say into just five days?

It will depend very much on the students, and how far along the path to becoming successful writers they are. If you're starting from scratch, there's a hell of a lot to learn. If you're further along, there's *still* a hell of a lot to learn. I'm sure it's impossible to learn everything there is to know about producing fiction. It's more a matter of picking up the basic skills that apply to all fiction writing, honing them, and applying them to the sorts of ideas that you, as a unique being, get in your head. The writing of science fiction and fantasy places extra demands of craft and skill upon the storyteller. One can't assume a present-day terrestrial setting, or a population of normal humans acting within it. Anything might happen, anywhen—that's the fun of it—but cluing the reader in to the strangeness can be tricky.

The best way to "learn to write" is to by gosh write something, be ruthless with self-editing *while being aware of the principles of fiction writing*, and then write some more. Help and encouragement are to be had from friendly editors, fellow writers, and teachers, but the only way to become a good writer is to practice writing, just as the only way to become a good violinist is to practice the violin.

So—*can* successful speculative fiction writing be taught? Or is there some magic you have to be born with? I think that people who like to read the stuff have the magic in them already... but even great sorcerers have to follow the rules of sorcery, don't they?

There's magic on display in the pages of this magazine—go forth, explore; and if you like, let us know what you think. We love to get letters from our readers.



Sally McBride - Editors
DALE L. SPROULE - Editors
Phyllis Gotlieb - Poetry Editor
GERRY TRUSCOTT - Editorial
Consultant

Visit our web page - <http://www.astro.psu.edu/users/harlow/transversions>

MONSTERS
CONTEMPLATE
THE
REVOLUTION
by
SEAN
STEWART

Sean Stewart's first novel, *Passion Play* won two major Canadian awards.

He followed up with *Nowhere Man* and more awards. His riveting 1995 3rd novel *Resurrection Man* is turning heads. Sean's upcoming *The Night Watch* begins 50 years after the magic first got out of control in *Resurrection Man*.

Come with us, as we join one of the world's wildest dreams in progress and listen in, as

"Monsters Contemplate the Revolution".

Story excerpted from *The Night Watch* (Ace 1997).

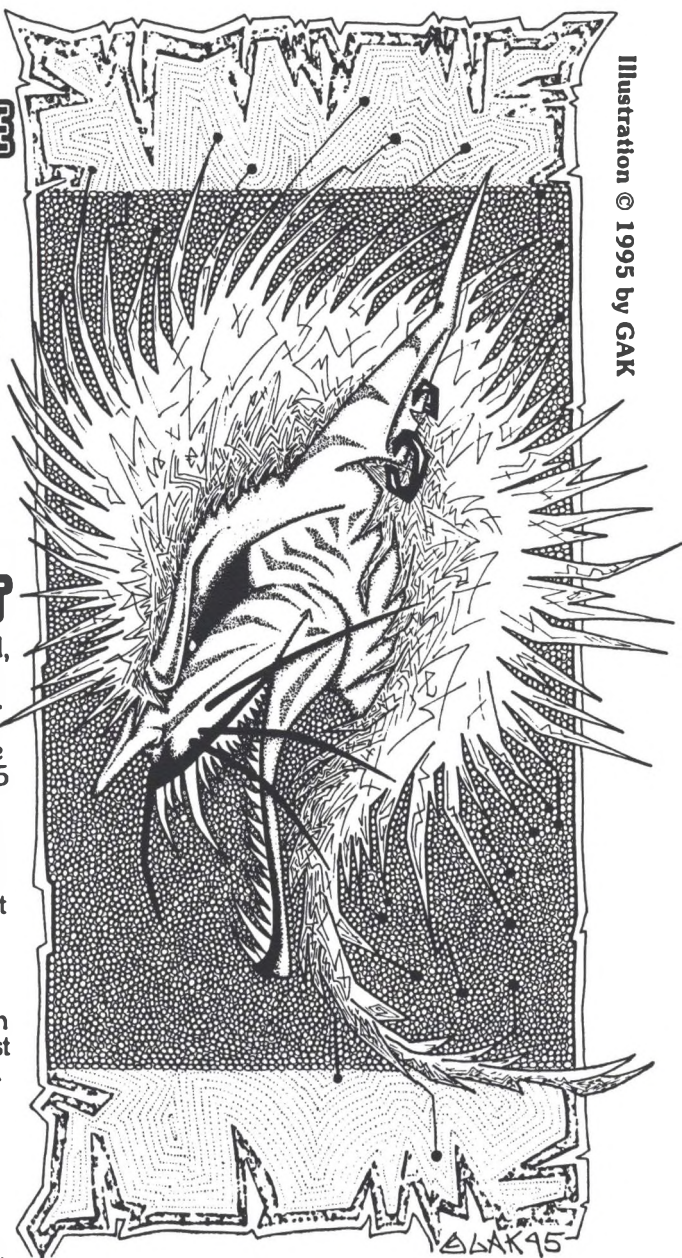


Illustration © 1995 by GAK

“So. EVERYBODY READY FOR A LITTLE ACTION?”

The Duct Weasel swerved his thin head around with a smile.

“Ready and willing,” said the Girl. She held up the power screwdriver she had been issued, and tabbed it. The modified head whined and jumped twice, like a snake striking.

The Window Washer blinked and looked away. The Actor watched, expressionless.

“Nine...eight...seven...” The Elevator hummed quietly to himself, poking at their little fire. Yellow flames crawled and danced. Burning rubber sizzled and stank.

The fire they owed to the Duct Weasel. Over the Window Washer’s protests, he had slunk into the abandoned Tire Orchard, slithered up a trunk, and cut free a radial with the tin snips at his belt. The Elevator carried it back to the store-front where they had been stationed. The Duct Weasel also knew where to find an old oil barrel. He cut five snips into the barrel’s top rim, and let the Elevator peel it down like a metal flower. The noise had been terrible, but at the end they had a nice little fire pit.

The radial boiled and flared inside, sending up gouts of foul black smoke. The Window Washer watched the coils rise, vanishing into the night sky. “I remember when they didn’t even have night here,” he said softly, turning his eyes away from the darkness that pressed against their little camp fire. “Every window on every floor a blaze of light. Inside you’d see the Managers working late, the Janitors. Maybe a Secretary or two. The girls used to keep themselves up in those days. Short skirts and long legs, fourteen fingers on the switchboards and they always smiled into their headsets, even when there was no video on the call.” His long, thin fingers ran absently across his perfectly flat face.

“Spent a lot of time watching them, did you?” the Girl said.

The Window Washer looked away.

“So. Everybody’s gear in good order?” The Duct Weasel slid the magazine into his pistol with a soldier-like snap. He tried to hold the gun with casual authority, but he had trouble jamming his hardened fingertips in around the trigger. After a moment’s fiddling he let the thing rest in his lap.

With a small smile the Elevator hefted his eight-foot long crow-bar, wide as a man’s leg. Heavy as it was, the Elevator switched it like a toy in his enormous arms, each twice the thickness of a big man’s chest.

The Duct Weasel smiled back, a little nervously. “Good man.”

“Better keep an eye on him.” The Girl smirked at the Weasel. “He

could go drive that thing through a dumpster like it was made of aluminum foil. Just imagine what he could do to you."

"Or to the enemy," the Weasel snapped, weaving his thin head about.

The Actor worked with a tiny glass file, smoothing out some imperceptible roughness in one of his masks. If he had a weapon, he did not choose to show it.

With a soft, sticky noise, the Window Washer reached down into the darkness and pulled up his clumsy home-made flail, a long pole with a short iron bar at the end attached by a chain. He looked at it with misgiving. Each of his six limbs was almost seven feet long, thin and spindly, with suckered palps on his fingers and toes. As graceful and sure-handed as he was crawling across the glass ziggurats downtown, he seemed oddly fragile on the ground. When he stood his arms splayed wide, awkward and empty with no surface to stick to. He was constantly having to wrap them around his chest, or, if sitting, his knees.

The Girl laughed. "Whose idea was it to give you that?"

"Wiser heads than yours or mine," the Weasel said.

"You'll break your own legs off the first time you try to use it."

Reluctantly the Window Washer nodded. "It is a curious business," he said. "I sometimes wonder... I sometimes wonder if it's all been thought out."

The Elevator glanced over at him. "Going down," he said softly. "There's been enough time for thinking! Now it's time to get something done."

The Duct Weasel pointed a thin claw at the burning tire they huddled around. "Isn't that enough of a thought for you?" He swept his hammer-fingered hands around to take in the smashed storefront, the abandoned trolley riding up onto the sidewalk outside and the blind street lamp bending over it. "It's enough for me."

Slowly the Actor lifted up his orator's mask and placed it before his face. "When men are employed, they are best contented; for on the days they worked they were good-natured and cheerful, and, with the consciousness of having done a good day's work, they spent the evening jollily; but on our idle days they were mutinous and quarrelsome."

"And yet... I remember when it worked," the Window Washer said. "And I looked through the glass and there they were, the Managers and Accountants, and they had charts and graphs and estimates, and

things went on the same from day to day, and life was fair. And now those offices are empty." He looked around their little fire. "And here we are." He picked up one end of the flail as if it might sting, and studied it. "And here I am."

"And there you are," the Weasel said. "Do you want to make us be there too? What good does that talk do?"

"Why d'you think they gave you such a thing?" the Girl said. "Too much talking, that's why. So tonight when we rush in, there's you with your funny pole all wrapped around your legs, twice the height of the rest of us, and who d'you think makes an easy target for the enemies' Cops? That's what the Sharps think: one less complainer by morning. Neat, ain't it?"

"Enough," the Elevator said.

The Girl looked at him with contempt. "It's a new world, Muscles. Better get used to it. The Secretaries don't put out like they used to, either, Leggy." She stood up, leaning over the fire towards the Window Washer so her young breasts filled her PVC bodice. "Or did you want to work something out, eh? Got anything else as long as your arms? Looking for that special romantic moment to cherish before the firefight starts?"

"You repulse me."

The Girl laughed and turned away. "I'm going to take a piss. Back in a minute." Clatters trailed her into the darkness, and once or twice a curse.

They listened to her go.

"Sad," the Elevator said, poking at the fire.

The Window Washer shuddered. "Two arms, two legs, five fingers, five toes. Disgusting. Everything white and soft, like a slug. She's nothing but a larva. Everything unfinished."

"That's what I'm talking about," the Weasel hissed. "Try to have a little sympathy. She's got nothing, you see? You and me, at least we had jobs once. At least we did something that meant something. That's what built our characters. But a young one like her – she's never grown up. Never had a job, never had a purpose. That's what this is all about," he said passionately. "So the Power in the Offices abandoned us. Died, faded out, went crazy, went away who knows. So all those buildings of yours are empty. What are we going to do? Wander around witless like ants from a broken nest? Or make a meaning for ourselves?"

A grunt came from the back of the store, followed by a moment's silence, and then a long hissing, pattering sound.

"Look at me. I was the vent man from Smithe to Georgia, Howe

Street to Hornby. The Stock Exchange, the Art Gallery, the Gargoyle Hotel, the Bank of Hongkong. I did them all. And then one day they shut the Gallery down. Then it was the Bank, for repairs; but the repairs never got done. No one staying at the Hotel any more. Nothing to do, I get crazy. I spend days winding up and down the old ducts, picking out lint. When I finally had to admit it was over, I went crazy. I was down drains and up sewers. I tell you honestly, I went creeping through buildings just to hide in the vents in the ladies' to see them do their business. I'm telling you true.

"That's how low I sank," the Weasel said, rubbing a claw across his teeth. "That's what it's been like the last few years. For all of us." He looked keenly at the Window Washer. "Those scratches on your face – where did they come from?"

The Window Washer colored. "Cleaning streets," he whispered.

The Duct Weasel leaned back. "There's my point."

"Six...seven...eight," the Elevator said. "...ding."

The Actor scraped a fleck of melted rubber from the bruised glass cheek of his mask, and carefully settled it before his face. "This country needs and, unless I mistake its temper, the country demands bold, persistent experimentation. It is common sense to take a method and try it. If it fails, admit it frankly and try another. But above all, try something."

A moving clatter of steps bounded down the darkened street towards them, like a cheetah wearing sneakers.

"Courier," the Elevator said sourly.

The Weasel laughed. "Yeah, they're always in a hurry."

Then the Courier was on top of them, stretching out his two-metre length on all fours, rolling his shoulders and flexing his rubber-soled hands out in front of him like a leopard. In the light from their burning tire, sulphur-yellow stripes kindled down the length of his neoprene skin. He shook out his legs. Sweat droplets spattered from the hairs on his enormous hams, almost half the thickness of the Elevator's arms.

"News or gossip?" the Weasel said.

"News!" the Courier said, offended. "Urgent dispatch."

"It's always urgent, to a Courier," the Elevator said, poking moodily at the fire with his enormous crowbar.

"Hey there, Slowpoke! Didn't you use to work at the National Trust Tower?"

The Girl stumbled back from the dim interior of the store and leaned against one wall, studying the Courier. Gleams of firelight wavered on

her bare calves and glistened on her pale, scarred knees.

"Urgent Dispatch?" the Weasel prompted.

"Mm." The Courier straightened, blinked, and recited: "Urgent, all Team Leaders. Operation Hostile Takeover has been rescheduled for tomorrow night. Stand ready."

"That's it?" the Duct Weasel said, agitated. "Another delay? Why?"

The Courier shrugged. "The target acquired a whole new corps of Cops last month, as you know. Imported from across the mountains, they say. Control just wants to make sure they can be neutralized."

"And the real story?" the Girl drawled.

The Courier's voice dropped to a whisper. "They say these new white Cops aren't even human. Quick as lightning, strong as our friend here," he said, pointing to the Elevator. "Their bullets can go through foot-thick concrete. They say they can shoot the eye out of a blackbird at a thousand metres."

Nobody spoke. Even the Actor's restless fingers stilled on his glass mask. Yellow pistils of flame wavered in the centre of the steel flower the Elevator had torn for their firepit. Strings of rubber curdled and flared. On the wide rims of the tire, beads of rubber gathered and ran like hot black tears.

"Well, gotta go," the Courier said brightly. "Neither snow nor sleet nor dead of night, you know." And gathering his great haunches beneath him, he bounded into the night.

A mean little whine spat from the darkness by the wall as the Girl tabbed her screwdriver. "So what's the plan?"

"Remotes," the Duct Weasel guessed. "That's what they do with Minotaurs. They'll use miniatures to gather information and then send in Stingers to finish the job."

"A hundred of these new Cops? How many Stingers have we got?" the Window Washer asked.

The Elevator shrugged. "What if these white Cops shoot them down?"

The Girl pushed herself away from the wall. "Nah. They won't try to take them out with rockets. Not that many of them. They'll go for the barracks. Which I have seen, by the way."

"What!"

"That's right. I walked out on my own two feet to have a look at what we're supposed to get out of all this."

"You crossed Granville Street?" the Window Washer whispered, horrified and fascinated. "What was it like?"

For the first time the Girl looked uncomfortable. "I don't know. Okay, I guess. It feels very...open. Sometimes they have whole blocks

with nothing but grass and trees in them. It's kind of a creepy feeling. Naked."

"Don't worry about that. We can always build it up," the Weasel said stoutly. "We got a world of people here just dying to build up something new. Wouldn't that be fine, eh? Hauling up a brand new box in a shaft you helped build yourself?" He clapped the Elevator on one huge shoulder. With a slow, sweet smile the Elevator dropped his eyes.

"Or you – feeling your way around the corner of a new tower, a wiper-blade in one hand and a bucket of water over your arm, looking down on the whole damn world again, eh?" The Weasel grinned, weaving his head back and forth. "Maybe someday you'd be climbing up between floors and you'd hear a knock coming through the building at you, and it would be me in there, doing the vents.

"And what's more, it wouldn't have to be old, cranky buildings either. We'd have a chance to start new, totally fresh. Never get another claw stuck in the grill-work like they had at the Hotel!"

A small smile crept across the Window Washer's perfectly flat face.

"What about me?" the Girl said acidly. "Will I be dolled up in a short skirt inside one of those windows, taking notes for the Middle Management?"

The Weasel looked at her. "Girl," he said simply. "You can be anything you want to be. I don't know what your destiny is. But if you can see it, you can make it for yourself."

The Actor raised his mask and said, "Our destiny exercises its influence over us even when, as yet, we have not learned its nature: it is our future that lays down the law of our today."

The Elevator stirred unexpectedly. "I heard a story, the other day, of a Minotaur loose in Pacific Centre. It crept in from the slums, they said: all skin and broken glass. A lot of people tried to hide in the mall and wait for the remotes, but they never came. It found them, one by one." A shudder travelled across his enormous back.

The Duct Weasel swallowed, and licked his thin lips. "So. So the Cops must be busy mapping this barracks you were talking about."

"They'll burn it down," the Girl said confidently. "No point trying to take these white Cops one by one. They'll get the barracks and take them out all at once. Stupid of them to keep their Cops in one place."

"They don't have faxes," the Weasel said confidently. "That's

our advantage. We've got cells, faxes, Couriers, tubes, phones: everybody talking to everybody."

"Used to be, anyway," the Window Washer said.

"Now that's enough!" the Weasel said, jumping up. "Every time I try to pull things together you try to pull them apart," he hissed, waving the gun around. One claw had slipped inside the trigger guard.

"They shouldn't do that," the Elevator said seriously. "They shouldn't have let the Minotaur find those people. That's their job."

Dancing with rage the Weasel bent down and yelled into the Elevator's wide face. "The old jobs are gone! Haven't you got that through your thick skull yet?"

"They ought to do what they're supposed to." The Elevator's enormous right hand bunched around the crowbar.

"Shit," said the Girl.

The Weasel jumped back, raising the gun. "Enough of that!" he squeaked. "Do you know what the penalty for treason is?"

Materializing from the darkness like a run of bad luck, a Sharp strolled up outside their shattered shop front and looked in. He stood eight feet tall and you could cut paper on the crease in his slacks; you could shave in the reflection from his black patent-leather shoes. If the hems of his pants were a little worn, and the cuffs of his dress shirt beginning to go gray, he still wore a fresh blown-glass flower in the buttonhole of his double-breasted suit, and he still smelled great: a sharp odour of sandalwood and killer cologne.

"Is there a problem here, gentlemen?" he asked, smiling whitely.

Yellow light from their fire gleamed in the depths of his asphalt-black sunglasses.

The Weasel bit his lip, head weaving.

"No problem," the Window Washer said quietly. "You know how it is, sometimes. Waiting."

"Of course," the Sharp said. Whitely, he smiled again. "If you need to try something on, there will always be somebody nearby happy to help you. Just...remember that."

And like a bad dream he was gone, leaving behind only an oily tension and the great smell of Brut.

The little yellow fire hissed and stank.

"'War alone brings up to its highest tension all human energy and puts the stamp of nobility upon the peoples who have the courage to face it.'

Wearily, the Duct Weasel sat down, dropping the gun in disgust. He looked at the Actor. "Oh, shut up," he said. ❖



Illustration © 1995 by GAK

IS THERE LIFE ON MARS?

by **DAVID C. KOPASKA-MERKEL AND SUE STORM**

Our life on Mars a cool, wide river,
Salmon leaping to a big brown bear.
Campfire radio made Heather shiver,
Bad news the only garment she could wear.

Borrowed snow geese crease the sky,
As moons rise lifeless and opaque.
A silence of details ignores the lie,
Leaving us with gods we cannot take.

Red daubs imitate but don't deceive,
The dust obscures the stars we know,
Aborigines with dance achieve,
A redirection in the ruddy flow.

Over chaste trees spectres blaze,
Ancient songs pierce our hearts.
New hills tremble at sun's first rays,
Our love warms as alien night departs.

Sue Storm's short story collection *Star Bones Weep the Blood of Angels* is available for \$5 from Jasmine Sailing/Cyber-Psycho's A.O.D., Box 581 Denver, CO 80201.

David C. Kopaska-Merkel is editor of the poetry magazine *Dreams and Nightmares*. Order copies for \$2 each from 1300 Kicker Rd. Tuscaloosa, AL 35404

VISANNA



Illustration © 1995 by Anndiel Farrah

By CHARLES M. SAPLAK

We're glad to welcome Charles back to our pages, this time with a lyrical, richly detailed fantasy. In *TransVersions* #2, Charles gave us a science fiction tale; he's also a master of horror with work chosen for *Year's Best Horror* #22. Perhaps next time he will grace us with a magic realist mystery or a surrealistic western. With a talent like this, there's no telling where he might take you.

VISANNA STOOD BEFORE THE MIRROR IN HER TOWER

room, staring at the face she wouldn't wear tomorrow. Occasionally she moved her head from side to side, catching glimpses of the twenty-six other faces that moved behind her like the time-lapse tail of a strange, slow comet.

Of course Visanna still would possess the face she had now; she just wouldn't be wearing it. At midnight it would move back to take its place in front of the twenty-six others, and a new face would appear on the front of her head – herself as a twenty-eight-year-old.

In the light cast by the leviath oil lamps in their iron sconces she examined the face one last time, then adjusted the tight braids in her long blond hair. She tugged gently at the lace sleeves of her gown, then practiced gesturing to make sure that the crocheted webs of black silk and golden thread connecting the gown's wrists to its sides would move naturally and not tangle.

As she gestured, she whispered to the mirror.

"Simply marvelous, Duchess Harrian."

"What an interesting observation, General Cho."

"You flatter me,..."

And with that, whether she had failed to think of a name or had tired of the rehearsal, she dropped her arms and, frowning, continued to examine her dress. Everything was in order. The jewellery she wore was arranged exactly as prescribed: the ruby pin above the left breast signifying that she was a soldier's wife; a small amulet of lapis lazuli signifying that her father had been of the technician caste, the amulet suspended by a slender chain of white gold, signifying that she was married but childless.

All is as it should be, Visanna noted silently, turning away from the mirror. *Everything is in its place.*

Her private tower room was as in any traditional Kavonian castle. Built on a semicircular plan and separated by a straight wall from her husband's semicircular private room, it had three large windows, the glasses of which could be retracted by geared handles. Visanna crossed the room and sat on the ledge of the centre window.

The sun was westering; it made the landscape as far as she could see crisp and long-shadowed. To the far west were the Meisterilein Mountains; next were the verdant hills of the Cobweb Forest; closer still were the cultivated lands around the border of the city; and then the slate-roofed cottages and shacks jumbled together, sometimes coming right up to the walls of her husband's estate and castle.

In the courtyard below was a shallow pool. Visanna stared into the

shimmering waters that reflected the orange and purple of the evening sky. She noticed something moving in the water, and for a moment imagined it was one of the magical fish or frogs that appeared in fairy tales to offer gifts to princesses. Next she thought it was a pale bird walking on a ledge protruding from the tower wall. Looking more intently, she realized that she was seeing her own reflection; her current face and the faces of her younger selves trailing behind her like jealous ghosts looking over her shoulder.

It could have been them calling to her in a strange voice that seemed to simultaneously taunt and warn and plead, “Visanna, Visanna, Visanna,…”

But in fact it was her husband in the circular marriage chamber below, calling to tell her it was time to leave for the party, his steady voice echoing and distorting as it touched the stone walls of the tower.

The ride to the castellated home of Duchess Harrian was quiet, save for the metallic claws of the chimerasaur team and the carriage wheels on the cobblestones.

Artran, Visanna’s husband, sat beside her, resplendent in his Lieutenant’s dress uniform, his miniature medals (including the Disc of Valour awarded him during the Chaurenian War) adorning his left breast below the golden sword-and-stirrup device that marked him as a cavalry officer.

Visanna examined his faces. His head was slightly turned so he could look out the carriage window at the sights on the way. He regarded the beggars, who sat against moss-encrusted walls like bony heaps; the merchants who held up hammered metal jewelry and bottled spices and intricately woven fabrics while they chanted prices at passers-by; the bored soldiers who wandered the streets in search of diversions.

Artran watched without expression. His face could have been chiselled from stone; every face behind him was a regular and balanced component of his life. He was a man of orderly progression.

Their marriage, of course, had been an arranged one.

“Visanna, you’re staring at me,” Artran said.

Her reverie broken, she blushed and stammered.

“I was curious, my Lord. I wondered what you found so fascinating in the streets of the city.”

He smiled wryly. “Kavone at peace. The nation of Chauren has been deconstructed, its legislatures discredited and its armies routed. Who will profit from this latest war?”

His voice, like his faces, was emotionless.

Visanna held her silence.

Artran changed the subject. "Do be polite with the Duchess Harrian, my love."

Visanna scowled, and faces behind her showed the faintest traces of echoing expressions. "She makes me feel like a flower. She moves through her parties like some great, monstrous gardener among her tiny flowers. She dotes, but I fear that she might reach down with her fingernails and pinch off an ear, or my nose, or some fingers, as if pruning a plant. All for my own good, you understand."

"Tolerate her, Visanna," Artran said softly. "For some reason I can't fathom any more than you can, the Duke and Duchess are considered to be important."

"Is there any good reason for the party this evening?" Visanna asked.

Artran shrugged. "The Duchess promised fascinating things, strange and memorable sights."

The Harrian family mansion exhibited the same characteristics Visanna most closely associated with the Duchess herself: in bulk and dimension it was large beyond reason, occupying a full city block. Like all the structures that had survived from the days when battles were fought on Kavonian soil, it exhibited curious architectural holdovers. For example, the roof's edge was ringed with elaborate gargoyles whose mouths could serve as machicillations for pouring hot oil on seigers – but these days they were decorated with gay flags and fresh arrangements of country flowers. Likewise, certain corners of the mansion were supported by twenty-metre-tall caryatids, representations of Meisterleinién cave-dwelling monsters, the surfaces of which held iron spikes on which many a storm trooper had bled to death hundreds of years ago – but these days they were more likely to be covered not with rotting corpses but with ceremonial banners and jade-coloured vines.

A groom, wearing an elaborate but threadbare ceremonial costume, took the lead chimerasaur by their bridles and led them clattering away into the estate stables.

"Careful with those beasts, son," Artran called.

The youth nodded in reply. "They'll not fight, sir; they'll be well cared," the footman called back.

Artran took Visanna by the left arm. She felt slender and fragile in his large right hand.

"Good cheer, my flower," he whispered, eliciting a nervous smile.

The sounds of music and laughter; the smells of incense and roasted meat; the gay light of lanterns set in mirrored webs; these things poured into the night.

Together they ascended the stairs to the mansion of Family Harrian.

Duchess Harrian greeted them personally. Visanna cringed as the woman approached.

The banquet hall was immense, but the Duchess filled it. The mirrored lamps and roasting fires were blinding, but the Duchess outshone them. The resonance of the strings and reeds caressed into music by the savant musicians in their cages was throbbing, but the Duchess drowned it out.

"Oh, it is our Artran, our heroic Artran," the Duchess sang as she clasped Artran's right hand between her own huge, meaty hands.

You honour us with your invitation, Duchess Harrian," Artran said, The Duchess tilted her head back and to one side so she could cry out, "The Chaurenian War was not over until you returned; and our party had not begun until you arrived."

Artran nodded politely, Visanna noticed, the faces of his former selves bobbing as if to echo the sentiment of their living replacement.

And then the Duchess turned to Visanna, who steeled herself in preparation. She caressed Visanna's cheeks and turned the smaller woman's head upward so she could look into her eyes. The Duchess's hands were heavily scented with something that reminded Visanna of the fragrance of moonsigh blossoms, and her palms were slick with perspiration.

"Our Visanna; our sweet child. Artran's wonderful wife," the Duchess cooed. Her voice was musical, but her gaze pierced Visanna like grey steel needles.

"And you, our child," the Duchess continued. "Soon to be no longer a child. Soon to be no longer amazed by the world. You are lucky to be with us, Visanna, just as we are lucky to have you."

"We are honoured, of course, Duchess Harrian," Visanna said, meekly. She felt as if the life force were flowing out of her into the larger woman's hands.

"There will be fascinations here tonight," the Duchess said, her eyes darting from Visanna's face to Artran's, then back again. "We will see marvelous things tonight, our children, I promise you that."

Visanna, when released by the Duchess, had to clutch at Artran's arm in order to not fall to the floor.

As the Duchess turned away Visanna stared at the line of faces – they numbered more than sixty – trailing behind the woman's head.

Even in the days when the Duchess's face had been unlined and youthful it still had a hungry, forceful, but slightly befuddled look.

Visanna looked at the expressions in the eyes of the past faces, and realized that, like the Duchess's long line of faces, which bobbed along behind her with dim echoes of her expressions fleeting across their aspect, the Duchess herself was not entirely engaged with the people around her. She moved among her guests – now greeting a couple, now touching the arm of a man and tugging him towards a woman, now making a great show of laughing at some joke – but she was removed from the reality of the world around her.

We are all scenery to her, Visanna thought.

At one point early in the party, a parade of attendants entered with strange birds in iron cages. The jewel-plumed birds had been captured at great risk from their nests high in the sheer cliffs of the Meisterilein Mountains.

The crowd fell quiet as the cages were hung from hooks on tall metal poles; the savant musicians all set down their instruments.

The birds, one by one, began to sing; their songs banished the silence.

The people in the crowd stole glances at one another, and gradually began breathing in time to the song the birds were weaving. (Visanna felt as if she were the tiniest, simplest thread in a great tapestry draped over the throne of an unimaginable and dreadfully uncarving titan.)

The savant musicians, themselves in cages, leaned forward and tilted their heads from side to side, in order to listen more analytically to the birdsong.

And the song was woven tighter and tighter around the throng of revellers, who stood swaying and rocking to the rhythms. Attendants took the cages from their hooks and carried them towards the braziers.

Later, Visanna's attention was drawn to one particular woman who picked delicately at the flesh of roasted bird. She was stunningly beautiful, with slick black hair woven into a complex braid; with light blue eyes, pale skin and translucent teeth.

But Visanna looked behind the woman and saw the faces of her past selves. Yes, going back only a few years she saw the same exquisitely sculpted features and mysterious, calm expressions, but looking farther back she could see the earliest faces. No, this woman had not always been beautiful! Far back in her past, her faces were sallow and

thin, her eyes ringed round with the crimson of pain and the grey of fatigue, her hair stringy. Perhaps she had been a refugee, or perhaps even a slave. She had not always been noble. No matter what she was capable of looking like now, there was no possible way to beautify that young woman she had been.

Taking some comfort in the pity she was able to direct towards the woman, Visanna turned away.

She moved through the crowd until she came to seven people surrounding a Ghost Pool, standing with their hands joined. The group peered into the liquid, watching the images created by their conjoined imaginations. *From above they must look like some strange flower, Visanna thought. There are the seven of them forming a ring; behind them are the faces of their past; at their centre is the rippling pool.*

Within the waters Visanna saw an image of a castle carved from the solid rock of a mountainside, its towers and chambers clinging to sheer cliff faces. A network of ledges and carved staircases led away from the castle like a spiderweb. A bloodied, armoured warrior with a broadsword stood perched on one of the narrow staircases facing down a group of scaly ape-like creatures. Some of the creatures carried stone spikes as weapons.

Visanna looked up at General Cho and the line of misty faces (nearly seventy of them!) behind him. The progression of his faces showed clear demarcations. For periods of years there was a steady march of graceful aging, but three times in his life he had undergone drastic changes, seeming to age decades in a matter of a few years.

Each time his face would rapidly lose some of its colour, some of its force of expression. Some process localized in those years had leached away great parts of his life.

Visanna, as unobtrusively as possible, counted the faces behind the General. She could see that the abrupt changes in the man had occurred ten years ago, twenty-five years ago, and sixty years ago. So it had been the major wars that had beaten the man down, even though they had failed to kill him. If she looked far enough back, Visanna could see that Cho had been a normal enough child, but had grown up during the decade of the (oddly misnamed) Third Great War. During those years his face had the hollow cheeks and slack skin of a starving child, his eyes the lustreless stare of one who had had to come to terms with violent death far too early and far too often.

Her surreptitious examination of the General's past was broken by the playing of "Ruffles and Flourishes" by the savant musicians. All heads turned to the ballroom entrance.

The Duchess, glowing, stood by the portal. She seemed to drink in the attention of the crowd as a plant, shaded for far too long, would drink in the light of the sun.

A figure appeared.

Some members of the crowd muttered among themselves; a few gasped.

Visanna's heartbeat quickened. She couldn't believe what she was seeing.

All around her, people whispered as the uniform and insignia of the figure was recognized.

"This soon? I thought the reparations talks were still going on...."

"How he must feel, here among his enemies! Do you think he feels shame because they lost the war?"

"Is that what one looks like? I would have thought they'd be like some monsters or something...."

At yet none of the people around Visanna dared to even speak of the strangest aspect of the man who now entered the room.

A butler stood at the entrance and called to the hall, "The honoured Ambassador from the Kingdom of Chauren."

Visanna couldn't pull her eyes away from the man who nodded and descended the entrance steps, erect with pride but not foolish pride, pacing his stride with neither trepidation nor foolhardiness. And yet Visanna's fascination with the man had nothing to do with the political overtones of his presence.

Visanna could see his current face clearly enough, the face of a middle-aged man, with neatly-trimmed goatee and moustache, skin more tanned and leathery than a typical Kavonian, and eyes dark and intense.

And behind him were no faces, absolutely no traces at all of the people he had formerly been. But in front of him – in front of him – were pale, translucent images of the people he would someday be!

Yes, he and he alone, of all the people Visanna had seen in her entire life, possessed images of his own future selves, but that fact alone was not what disturbed Visanna so. What was most unsettling was that the future selves were so few in number.

Surely the Ambassador realized that. Certainly he was aware of the yearly selves before him, growing steadily greyer, steadily more wrinkled, steadily less lustrous of eye, and then, abruptly, five, six, seven years into the future – ceasing to exist.

Visanna felt as if the implications of this were closing in over her like the opaque waters of a flood. How did this odd foreigner see

himself? Did he conceive of his life not as a culmination of the forces and events of the past, but as an odd and purposeful movement towards a future state of being?

And then the Ambassador was before her, being tugged by the Duchess Harrian.

The faces drifted before her, the face of the Ambassador in the last year of his life closest to her eyes, transparent and mist-like, and behind it another and another and another, back seven years to the current, living-flesh Ambassador, his thinking, living relegated to a spatial position like that of a ghost whose time is past....

Visanna broke from the grasp of the Duchess, and pushed past the Ambassador from the vanquished land.

She pushed through the crowd, the faces of the living and the faces of those selves that had been looming before her like thick stalks of wheat.

The savant musicians threatened their instruments into a stately and complex melody.

Visanna pushed her way into the entrance hall. On one wall of the elaborate chamber hung an ornate, gilt-framed mirror.

Beneath the surface of the music, a clock groaned to life, and unnoticed by all except Visanna, struck the hour of midnight.

Visanna looked into the mirror. Within the glass was her face, looking back at her. It was the face that was so familiar from this past year, but as she watched, the features fell away, and took their place directly behind her head, insinuating their way into position before all of the previous years' worth of faces.

And the new face appeared before her, and the mirror – the unforgiving, disinterested mirror! – showed her the new features, the eyes less lustrous, the cheeks sallow, the eyes and mouth more deeply textured with wrinkles – another year's worth of beauty squeezed away by time.

In the distance the Duchess stole glances at her; Artran came up behind her and reached out to place a gentle hand on her shoulders; the servants looked away, afraid to be caught noticing someone of Visanna's class feeling something.

No one acknowledged the radically new face, down which tears were streaming.

That night, in their bed in the marriage chamber, Artran reached for Visanna. Pliant and calm, she came to him, and responded to him. Moonlight made it easy for her to see over Artran's shoulder as he was over her, and although it was taboo for her to do so, she opened her

eyes and looked at the series of faces looking down at her. The light shone through them. Somewhere back there, somewhere in the past, there might have been an Artran that Visanna could have loved. If so, she couldn't see the face, couldn't catch its attention, couldn't make contact with its eyes as all his faces seemed to long for this one ghostly moment of pleasure from their future.

Much later, in the deepness of the night, Artran slept, breathing steadily and slowly. Visanna lay awake beside him. After lying still and listening to him for nearly an hour, she carefully slipped from between the bedclothes. She pulled on a sheer night-dress, and softly padded up the stone stairs into her private chamber.

The full-length mirror stood in the centre of the room. Visanna avoided it as if it were an intruder, an unwelcome guest.

Moonlight shone through her open window. She felt herself drawn to the outside. She drifted across the room, and leaned out to look at the great stretch of village, farm and forest, and the distant mists of the Meisterlein Mountains.

Below her the surface of the reflecting pool rippled with the slight breeze. Visanna wished to look away before the pool quieted and was ready to show her a reflection. She wished that she could never see herself again, but could instead look as far as possible into the world, to see nothing but new things for the rest of her life.

And deeper than that desire was a vague suspicion she had that if she looked into the pool on this night, in this light, fired by the feelings that she had now, she would see that she had changed to the same type of faced person as had been the Chaurenian Ambassador – that she would now be a person who was not building on a series of past selves but advancing slowly on some future self. Furthermore, she felt a quiet yet steady dread that she would see only a small number of these future selves, and that, like the Chaurenian Ambassador, she would see proof of an impending death a few short years away.

And the breeze died.

And the rippling of the water ceased.

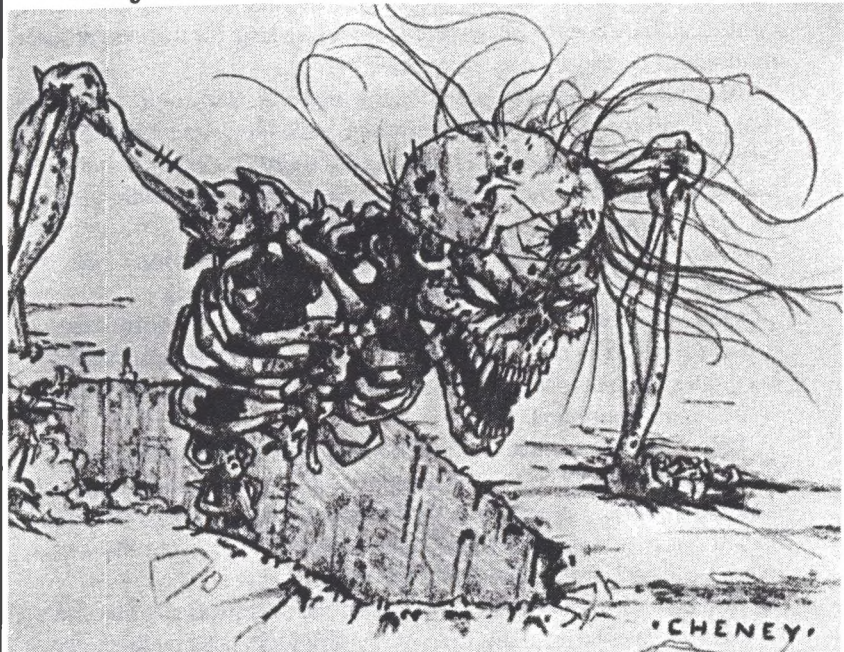
And Visanna, in spite of herself, glanced into the still waters of the pool. She gasped, her heart sank and she had to clutch at the stone edges of the window frame as she realized exactly what she was seeing.

Just as she had feared, there were no faces behind her. There were faces before her, each one steadily older and less beautiful and more alien to her, representing a future year of her life. What she had not considered, and what she now saw, and what filled her with deepest sadness, was not that there were so few, but that there were so, so many.



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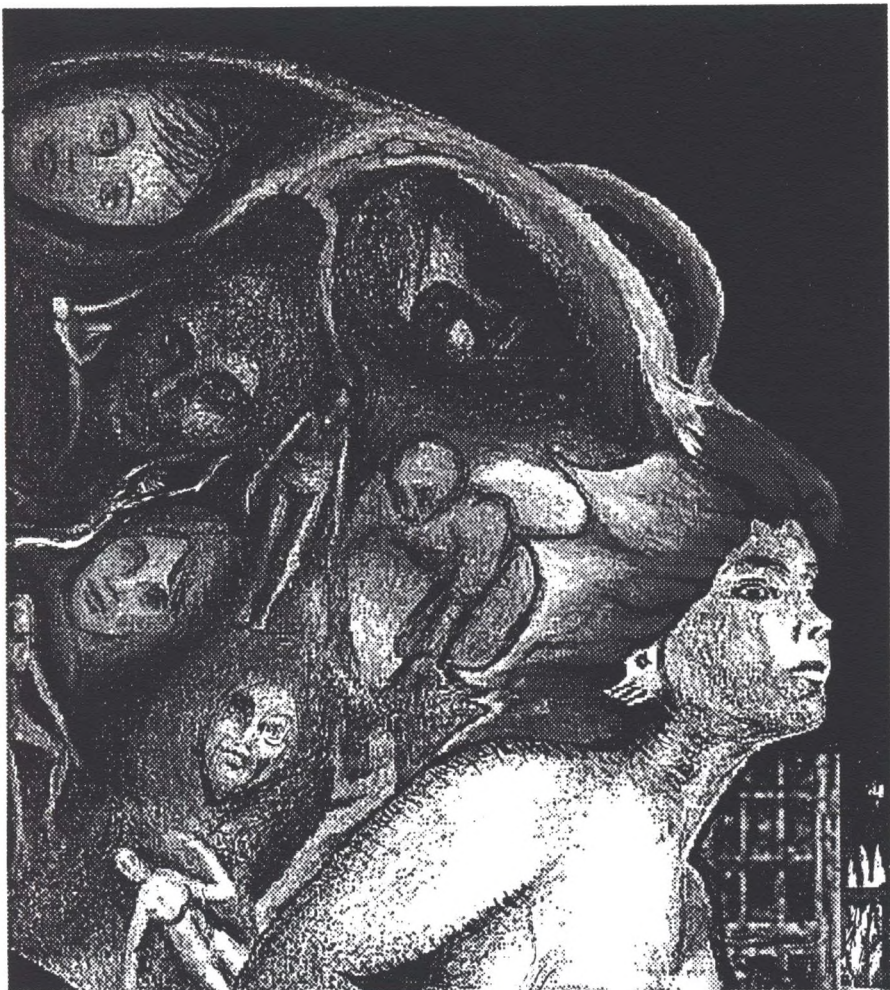
HARLOT

by CATHERINE MINTZ

In outrage, space stones
Our wanton old mother, Earth,
Round-bellied with life.



THE MUSE



by MARK LEIREN-YOUNG

If you have ever seen or heard the comedy duo Local Anxiety (of which Mark is 1/2), if you listen to CBC Radio, watch CBC TV or CTV, attend Fringe festivals, read *TV Guide* or *Maclean's*...you have probably encountered the work of Mark Leiren-Young. His controversial play, *Dim Sum Diaries*, received international attention when it aired on CBC in 1991. He is currently adapting his award-winning drama, *Blueprints from Space*, into a feature film. And he recently wrote an episode for the computer animated TV series, *ReBoot*. Where does he get his inspiration? Read "The Muse." Where does he get his energy? Your guess is as good as ours.

“YOU’RE A WITCH,” HE SAID, “AREN’T YOU?”

If she heard the question – and she did – she wasn’t going to acknowledge it. No comment. No smile. Perhaps her hazel eyes became just a little deeper for a moment, but that was all. And Graham wasn’t going to say it again because he knew instinctively that he wasn’t supposed to have said it the first time. Not that it wasn’t true, it’s just that he wasn’t supposed to know, or at least not acknowledge that he knew.

It was about three p.m. and he’d just climbed out of bed. Diana was still there, her nude body stretched out casually like a cat’s. Graham was enchanted. Most of the sex he’d had before meeting Diana could best be described in the kind of terms used for an enjoyable but not particularly memorable summer movie – pleasant, fun, entertaining. Sex with Diana was more than *entertaining* – lots of sweating and squirming and an aggressive, almost violent edge. Instead of heavy breathing, there were loud moans. Instead of ticklish giggles, there were surprised screams.

It hadn’t started that way. It had started as a seemingly innocent seduction, so innocent he hadn’t actually realized he’d been seduced until they’d just finished making love for the first time. They’d met at a party – casual and loud. She had come over and introduced herself, said she’d seen his work and had been curious to know if Graham looked the way she had imagined him. “Do I?” he asked shyly.

“No,” she said, with a wicked smile. “You’re too young to be Graham McNeil.”

And before he could ask what she meant, Graham heard Don and Cam talking loudly and violently as only drunks can do and went over to separate them before their drunken argument turned into a drunken brawl. When he returned to his table to finish their conversation Diana was gone.

A month later they ran into each other at a gallery opening for a photographer Graham despised and they soon found themselves a private corner to sit and talk, and talk. It was one a.m. when she said, “I must be going” and he offered her a ride. Neil, a part-time gallery owner and full-time coke dealer who’d been eying Diana all night, asked if he could hitch a lift with them, and before waiting for an answer, said he’d just be a sec while he ran upstairs to grab his coat. Before he had time to get to the closet they were already six blocks away, laughing at their escape and gossiping about who at the party had been doing what with, and to, whom.

It wasn’t long before he pulled up in front of Diana’s place. It was the type of place he had imagined she lived in, a redone heritage

building – an 80 year-old apartment with an ultra-modern attitude. “Would you like to go for a coffee,” she said. It was less a question than a suggestion. Then, before he could get his hopes up, “There’s a great all-night place on Douglas.”

So they parked the car and walked a couple of blocks to The Cosmic Cafe, a dessert bar that catered mostly to homosexuals, transvestites and prostitutes – the real downtown late-night crowd. The coffee was indifferent but the colourful crowd insured almost total privacy as they shared the abridged versions of their personal histories.

Graham had just been divorced. Well, sort of. He’d been living common-law since his last year of college. Seven years of sharing the same house, the same stories and the same fights with the same woman. When they divided the property she got the anger, he got the guilt and they split the resentment right down the middle. They’d been apart six months and Lara had already been with four other men – she’d made sure to call Graham to let him know on the premise that they were still friends, and friends told each other things like that. He’d been on a couple of dates that ended with friendly good-byes, maybe a goodnight kiss and a promise to call again soon.

Diana never spoke directly about her life, she implied things. Looking back he realized that she had never lied, she was simply cautious not to reveal things he didn’t want to hear. He’d figured out – or at least was fairly sure – that she was 32, had never been married and had been raised in California although her voice had a lyrical, almost foreign quality to it, like a woman he’d met from Amsterdam, a sculptor who’d learned English in a private school and spoke it almost too properly. When she took him back to her apartment she said he was the first man she’d ever asked to spend the night there. And as he crawled into bed beside her and she deliberately removed the baggy green t-shirt she’d worn into bed and pulled him towards her, well, there was nothing crude about that at all – it was more like a Victorian romance novel – almost impossibly slow and tender.

She had a key to his apartment a week later.

Graham figured she was the best thing that had happened to him in years. He’d left his job at the ad agency about six months earlier to become a full time artist and freelancer. It was a tough decision, but what gave him the strength to make the leap was the promise of a solo show at one of the city’s hotter galleries. Naturally, he made the leap just in time to watch the gallery go under. He was too proud to ask for the job back and too insecure to approach an agent or any other galleries. After six years of working primarily as a commercial artist,

for the first time since he'd left college he was free to paint whatever he wanted – and he had no idea what to paint. He was living on Visa cash advances, watching a lot of soap operas and late night wrestling, drinking more than he ever had and was within just a few loose stitches of coming apart at the seams.

Then *she* appeared. And instead of crumbling, which had seemed inevitable only a few hours earlier, when he returned home from her apartment he began to paint. And he knew from the first brush-stroke that it was better than any work he'd done before. It wasn't the pressure that inspired him, and it didn't come from wherever his ideas usually came from. It was her.

In one of her less guarded moments – he never saw her unguarded – Diana revealed a few details about her past affairs. She was a junior executive with a development firm doing the type of number and paper work Graham had never understood, but all the men she'd been with were artists of some sort – writers, actors, painters, photographers. He knew some of them and most of the ones he didn't know he'd heard of. She asked if he'd seen the work of a local writer, a novelist. He told her he had and pulled his most recent book, *The Empty Glass*, from his shelf. "You know the girl in it," she asked. "Alison?"

"The crazy one," he said.

"Yes," she laughed, "the crazy one. That was me."

"No," he said playfully. "You're not like that."

And she sighed very deliberately and said, "You're a very young soul."

He scowled, then decided to laugh instead. It was the first time he'd heard her get even vaguely metaphysical.

"I'm a very old soul," she said flatly, "and you are a very young soul. It's in your eyes. The sparkle wears away after a few incarnations." Then she giggled like a very young child and beamed him with a pillow, and thoughts of souls and incarnations fell away with their clothing.

When his show opened at La Magasin, Sharon, his old boss, came up behind him and grabbed him suddenly by the shoulder. Graham spilled some of his wine, Sharon didn't notice – she was looking at one of the pieces – all flames in orange, gold and a violent red. "If I'd known you could paint like this," she said, "I never would have let you get away."

Graham laughed.

Sharon laughed. Then she spoke again. "If I'd known you could

paint like that, I never would have hired you. *That's* what you should be doing."

His friend, Don, said it was the sex – and the freedom from Lara. But Graham knew it was more than that. As much as he enjoyed the sex, he didn't have the time or the energy to devote himself to it the way one normally does in the first few months of a passionate affair. Diana was busy at the office, he was busy in the studio. It was only on that fateful Sunday that they were able to spend the entire day in bed – rolling around, playing with each other's bodies like a pair of teenage counsellors at summer camp.

And that was the day it ended. "You have beautiful eyes," he said gently, too gently for her liking. He could tell she thought it was love, but since he hadn't said so and neither had she, he couldn't explain that love wasn't the feeling he had for her. He was enchanted.

So when they finally left the bed he tried to explain and said, as if this were an everyday thing to say, "You're a witch, aren't you." But even as the word came out he realized it was the wrong one. The word was muse, a much older soul than his own. He had lain with the muse and she had blessed him with her magic, but the trouble with magic is that the moment you name it you've broken the spell.

They dressed without talking and went out for a stroll in the sweet August air. She embraced him once, passionately, sadly, and they kissed again – his mouth, his tongue, trying to take in as much of her old magic as his young soul would allow. ❖

ABOUT THE EDITORS

Our poetry editor **Phyllis Gotlieb** has a short story collection, *Blue Apes*, coming out momentarily from Tesseract Books. Her tragic sestina "Geffen and Ravna" will appear in *TransVersions* #5.

Sally McBride won the 1995 *Aurora Award* for her story "The Fragrance of Orchids" in the May 1994 issue of *Asimov's*. Her fiction has most recently appeared in *Dead of Night* #13. She and Dale will teach Speculative Fiction in summer 1996 at the Victoria School of Writing.

Dale L. Sproule's novelette "Razorwings" will appear in *Terminal Fright* #11. He also has illustrations coming in *Deathrealm* and stories in *The Urbanite*, *NorthWords* and *Into the Midnight Sun*.

Gerry Truscott provided editorial help this issue and will continue to do so (in an expanded role) in future. As a writer, Gerry has sold sf stories to *Tesseract* and *Senary*. As an editor, he was instrumental in the creation of the Tesseract Books imprint (Canada's first sf publisher) and the subsequent sale of that line to the Books Collective in Edmonton. He has also served on the Editorial board at *On Spec*.



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The BRAIN RUBY



Illustration © 1995 by Lorri McMullen

by **STEPAN CHAPMAN**

Stepan Chapman has been publishing science fiction professionally for over 20 years. His work has appeared in several of Damon Knight's *Orbit* anthologies, as well as such varied venues as *Chicago Review*, *Grue*, *New Pathways in Science Fiction* and more. Stepan lives in Arizona. An anthology of his stories will be published in 1996 by Ministry of Whimsy Press - where the editor declares Stepan to be one of the most underappreciated humorists in the field. Judging by "The Brian Ruby," we'd have to agree.

LET ME TELL YOU ABOUT MY FAMILY.

My sister Sara and I grew up in a ditch-water town called Endeavor, Texas. We only lived there because Father had been born there, and he refused to sell his feed store. We all hated the place. But none of us ever said Boo to Father.

There were six of us: Father, Mother, me, Sara, and my older brother and sister, Otto and Katrina. Father ran the feed store that he'd inherited from his uncle, and we all lived in three rooms behind the store, under roofs of slanted tin. A shack, really.

The store was on Main Street, which was noisy as hell. There were always diesel trucks going back and forth between the highway and the cement plant where all the Mexicans worked.

All day, the walls shook, and all night, the bar across the street played mariachi music on its jukebox, while men threw up in the gutter. That was Endeavor.

But Father had been born there, and there he'd stay.

Father was very strict about our chores and our homework. He was perpetually cross with Mother. He hated the feed business. Father's only consolation in life was that half of the people in Endeavor were even poorer than he was.

Father and Mother had no social life at all. Father used to blame this situation, loudly and often, on Sara. He claimed that our family were social pariahs on account of Sara being a retard.

As my eighth-grade math teacher used to say: There is more than one thing wrong with this statement.

Oh, Sara *was* retarded. She walked a little jerky, and some of her words got slurred. But she wasn't the reason that no one invited my parents out to dinner or bowling. Heck, the *mayor* of Endeavor had a son who was a cross-eyed hare-lip, and *his* was the most popular family in town. No, Father's troubles had other causes.

Basically my parents were shunned because Father was an overbearing asshole and Mother was a doormat. The rest of us were shunned for reasons peculiar to each.

Consider Mother.

Mother's life revolved around the purchasing of old furniture. Mother only bought *valuable antiques at bargain prices*. To *her* they were antiques. To us they were thrift-store junk. All our rooms and several storage sheds were crammed with her stuff. Our rooms were like the attic of some demented old spinster woman.

Katrina was the eldest child. When she got tired of bossing Otto and me around, she would stick her nose in a fashion magazine.

Katrina's ambitions were to be a famous missionary nun in India, a marine biologist and a fashion model. I told her once that the Catholic church doesn't allow its nuns to model. Katrina refused to believe me.

My brother Otto spent a lot of time in the root cellar under the store. He went there to be alone and study. His main study materials were his stroke magazines, and his principle study was masturbation. *This was Otto's healthy side.*

His *mean side* came from his dieting. He was always on some rigorous diet, always thoroughly miserable. None of his diets had any effect on his weight problem. I tried to tell him once that exercise has some bearing on the problem. He told me that he'd read up on this question and knew a lot more about it than I did.

So you see how things were with my family. Apart from Sara.

Sara was fourteen years old, and everything made her happy. Going to high school and sitting in desks made her happy. The white trash girls who called her The Water Head made her happy. Sara would've been happy in hell.

She and I used to play soccer in the ditch behind the store. Sara would sing with the sparrows and croak with the toads. I don't think she had the faintest notion that our family was an unhappy one.

As for me, I slaved over my algebra and chemistry books, day and night. If I couldn't win myself a science scholarship at Texas State, it would be all over for me, and I might as well hang myself.

Now I can tell you about the enchanted coin laundry.

There was a condemned building down the street from Father's store. It was condemned about a week before Father died. Before the condemnation order, it had been Mr Ikegama's laundromat. But Mr Ikegama died, two days *before* the condemnation order.

I'd better tell this from the beginning.

On a morning in early April, at seven a.m. sharp, Mr Ikegama and his wife arrived at the front door of their coin laundry, to open it for business. Mr Ikegama unlocked the door and went in, as usual.

As Mrs Ikegama stood in the doorway, a chill came over her. The front room of the laundromat was empty. Her husband had vanished. There was a smell in the air, a savory smell, but out of place. She looked down at the linoleum.

On one square of the tile, there was a placemat and a white plate. On the plate were a grilled breast of chicken and four small boiled potatoes, under a sprig of parsley.

Mrs Ikegama realized the terrible truth. Her husband had been transformed into his favourite dinner! She backed slowly away from

the open doorway. She turned around, there on the sidewalk of Main Street, crossed the road and walked straight to the police station. She would never set foot in that building again. And who could blame her?

At 7:10, a pair of cops pulled up in front of the laundry in a prowler car. They approached the laundromat, armed with two brooms.

The front door had blown shut. One of the cops pushed it open with his broom handle. The other reached his broom across the linoleum and carefully nudged the plate and placemat onto the sidewalk, where they were taken into custody as evidence. Evidence of *what* exactly was never specified in the police report. The cops sent the plate of chicken to a forensics lab. Mrs Ikegama never claimed the body. But before she left town, to live with her sister in Idaho, she told her terrible story to her hairdresser. The hairdresser told Mother; Mother told Katrina; and Katrina told me.

The day after Mrs Ikegama left Endeavor, the town council came to the laundromat and glued paper banners across the plate glass windows. CONDEMNED. NO TRESPASSING.

When the story got around town, the older people all agreed that the Fabulous Brain Ruby had returned to Endeavor, as it did every twenty years or so. Some of the older people claimed that they'd actually witnessed the deaths that had resulted from the Ruby's last visitation.

I'd better tell you the legend of the Brain Ruby.

Sometime in the late 1800s, there was a Spanish nobleman who was crazy about rare jewels, the Count Alessandro. He sailed to Mexico in search of a legendary ruby that the tribes of the New World were supposed to be hiding.

In those days, Texas was part of Mexico, and the mad Count's quest took him as far north as Comanche land.

Among the Comanche, there was a greatly respected medicine woman, Raven-Flying-Backwards. This old woman was a *heyoka*, and she delighted in reversals. She lived in the river valley where Endeavor would later be built. Raven was nearing her death when the Spanish Count came to her pleasant valley.

Raven had been wondering what to do with her awesome reserves of magical powers, since they had to be left behind on Earth. Out of sheer perversity, she decided to give them to the person who deserved them the *least*. The conquistador. She sent a runner to him with a message. She claimed to possess *the Ruby*. Then she told her village to vanish into the prairie grass. She told them to allow the foreign man

to enter her teepee. And soon, he did so.

The Count held a dagger to the old woman's throat. As she died, she laid a curse on him, with all her magic in it.

"You will never *find* your desire," she cursed him. "But you shall *be* it. Let your gem-crazed brain *become* the gem it seeks!"

The Count's brain was transformed into a solid ruby, five inches across.

When the Elders of the Women's Lodge buried Alessandro, they cut the Ruby out of his skull as a souvenir. But they soon found that the Ruby was dangerous. They hid it, deep in a cave.

During the Gold Rush days, a prospector found it and brought it to Endeavor, which was a trading post, a stable and a land office by then. The prospector was murdered, the Ruby stolen. Any further history of its ownership is uncertain. But apparently, it never left town. It haunted Endeavor. And now and again, it would manifest itself.

It might appear anywhere, at the back of a closet or behind a water heater. It might enchant you before you ever saw it, just by its proximity. It would remain for an hour or a day or a week, then vanish again, always during the week of the full moon.

According to the legend, the Brain Ruby would grant one wish to any petitioner who approached it with a calm heart and an undivided attention. But anyone who ventured near it in a state of distraction was transformed into some object appropriate to his distractedness. Such was the fate of Mr Ikegama, starting his day and already anticipating his dinner.

How could he know that he'd entered the presence of the Ruby? He couldn't. That was how the gem traditionally announced its arrival. It killed someone. And more victims tended to follow the first. There are always unhappy people who are willing to risk their lives for a chance at their hearts' desires. But calm hearts are few.

It was Father's idea to break into the coin laundry and look for the Ruby. He wanted to ask the gem for wealth and prestige for our floundering family. Mother pleaded with him to forget the idea, but Father wouldn't be swayed. He had a *plan*.

Father didn't intend to undertake this grave project *alone*. Father had a *better* idea. All six of us would break into the coin laundry. That way, even if two or three of us lost our lives, *one* of us would surely succeed, and thereby win the eternal gratitude of our family for generations to come. All of which sounded very noble, as Father explained it.

But I have a pretty clear notion of why this plan appealed so much to Father. I think that he fully expected to be the only survivor. I think

he anticipated that when he walked out of that coin laundry, he'd be free of his burdensome family, wife and all. Wasn't he always saying that he was the only person in our family with any *will power*? At the least, he was looking forward to Sara being turned into something inanimate. Anything would be an improvement over Sara, in Father's opinion.

We sat around our kitchen table until long after midnight, drinking coffee and waiting for our marching orders. Finally, Father handed out the flashlights and told us to put on our jackets. We left the feed store and walked off into the frosty dead of night. We split up to avoid drawing attention, and reassembled in the service alley in back of the laundromat.

Father used a crow-bar to pry the rear door open, just like a real burglar. Our instructions were to fan out and search the building, thinking of nothing but the Ruby.

Father opened the door onto a narrow corridor between plywood partitions. He stood in the doorway, hesitating.

We rushed into the coin laundry, pushing Father ahead of us. To the right, there was an office cubicle with a desk and a filing cabinet. To the left, there were a toilet and a broom closet. Holding hands, Sara and I ventured into the big shadowy room where the dusty washers and driers stood in rows, in their white enamelled shells.

Sara and I used our flashlight beams to scan the floors, then the walls. Father started down a row of driers, yanking open their doors to look inside. Katrina searched the drums of the washing machines. Mother was rummaging around in the tiny office, while Otto feverishly emptied the broom closet. Sara and I shone our beams on each of the acoustic panels in the ceiling, but the Ruby wasn't up there. Sara hummed a pop song.

Suddenly, not far from our feet, Father's flashlight hit the floor and broke its bulb. Katrina and I turned our beams on Father, or what remained of him.

Father was a pile of metal bricks. The bricks were solid gold. He was a fortune in gold! The flooring creaked under his new weight. His edges gleamed. Mother emerged from the office.

She completely forgot Father's orders. We'd been ordered to ignore all casualties, but Mother gave up the search and started carrying bricks of Father out to the alley.

While hefting her second load, she called to Katrina for help. But her voice died away in the middle of a word. Mother was gone. In her place, beside Father, stood a handsome coffin of polished walnut,

with silver handles. Perhaps Mother's mind had jumped ahead to the arrangements for Father's burial. Hard to say with a woman like Mother.

Katrina was the next to lose her mind. Once Father went off, the rest of us followed his example, like popcorn kernels.

Katrina stood in the flashlight beams. She turned away from what was left of our parents, flinging back her long blonde hair, as though she were on camera. "Keep searching!" she shouted at the rest of us. "Find the Ruby!" As if Otto and I might have suddenly forgotten our reason for being in an abandoned coin laundry in the middle of the night.

Then Katrina was gone, and a cardboard cut-out of a screen-magazine glamour photo of Katrina was standing in her place. She'd turned into a lobby display for the movie of her life, which was a movie that no one would be making.

Otto moved towards Sara and me. His eyes were wild, and he was dripping sweat. "Let's get out of here!" he said.

He was talking good sense, and I knew it. But I was feeling stubborn. "You go ahead," I told him. "Sara and I are going to keep looking."

"But *Junior!*" he said. He looked ready to cry.

"Go on, you *chicken!* And take some of that *gold* with you!"

Otto drew back. He was sensitive to insults. He turned into a chicken. I felt bad about it. I hadn't meant to *kill* him.

Sara let him loose in the alley. I hope he found a good home.

Sara and I went on with the search. We could have run away. Looking for the Ruby wasn't my idea. But everyone has a secret heart and a secret heart's desire.

Sara went into the toilet. A rosy radiance poured into the corridor. I went and stood in the bathroom doorway.

Sara turned around and smiled at me. I smiled too.

Just then, I turned into Sara. I was Sara smiling back at Sara. And I've been Sara ever since. I look just like her, and I tell people that we're twin sisters. I use a different name, and I'm not retarded like Sara, but I'm *her* all right.

So the Ruby got me too. But in my case, I had the dumb luck of being distracted by Sara.

Sara knelt beside the toilet bowl and lifted the lid. Inside the toilet, glowing under a few inches of scummy water, was the Ruby. Its red light throbbled as though it was glad to see us. It was just the size and the shape of a man's brain.

Sara put both hands into the water and lifted it out. She wiped it

on the skirt of her dress.

"What shall we wish for?" I asked her.

"Let's wish to be a happy family," she suggested. So we did.

And it worked.

We sold a few bricks of Father for travel money, and we moved upstate, to a quiet little college town in the Panhandle. We rented a little place, and we found work.

We went to work with a seventy-year-old landscaper, Mr Vargner. The three of us drove around in his pick-up truck and planted trees. He was the best tree planter in northern Texas, and he taught us his trade.

When he died, he willed us his truck and his tools. Now Sara and I are the best tree planters in northern Texas. If you don't believe me, ask anybody.

We work all day, in the sun and the wind. We sing every song we can think of, and songs we make up.

And at night, we make wonderful love. Which is incest, I suppose. But I really don't worry about it too much.

Sara and I just want to be happy.

You might say that we lived happily ever after. ❖



C. Buhuruz

Copyright April 1992

PUPATION

by NANCY BENNETT

In the dream, hot green dance, we instinctively wed
in insect matrimony, pulling at each other's wings
self-centred thoughts dropping like flies...

Man and wife/ wide awake/ times
change – we begin to transform, others run away
but we do not look ugly to each other.

Cocooned, we make children with soft butterfly ways
but there are always nets wielded by giants,
sticky sweet webs spun by relatives, deceptions to be caught in.

I grow afraid, I have done this for the children, sweet,
wholesome.

I brought them forth without even a stinger to protect them...
running out of my dream, ahead of the sticky wet, awake to find
It is only the sweat of a nightmare, too many bodies in bed...

the children wrapped around me – feeding off me.
Sometime in the night they had dreamt they were spiders
and hid under my arms for comfort.

TRANSVERSIONS

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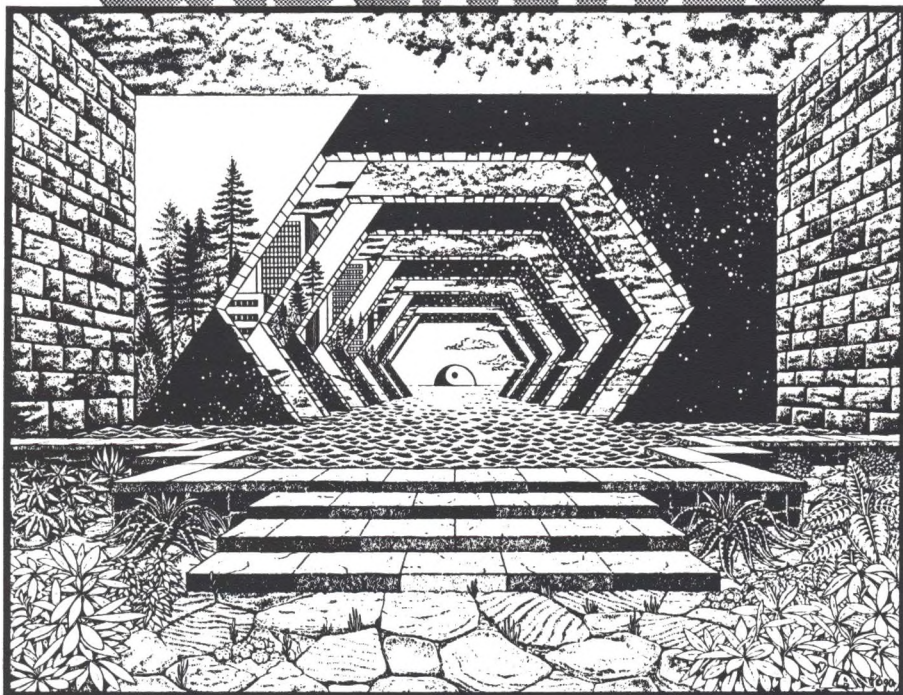
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VIRTUAL CASUALTIES



by

Illustration © 1995
by Ian Cooper

LESLEY MORRISON

Lesley Morrison is a Canadian living in Washington State with a boyfriend, two dogs and six cats. She's a rock n' roll musician as well as a writer and has previously been published in *On Spec*. Lesley's exploration of VR as a therapeutic device goes far beyond the usual technical/action adventure possibilities, taking us instead, deep inside the human psyche.

“THERE’S SO MUCH I DON’T UNDERSTAND,” says Amanda slowly.

“Yes, dear?” Her mother smiles at her. She is elegant as always, black-suited, with skillfully applied make-up that complements her dark eyes and skin. Her sleek cap of hair shimmers as she nods her head encouragingly.

“Do you remember when that little boy next door to us died? The time I asked you about death, and where he was?” asks Amanda. “Do you remember what you told me?”

Her mother sighs. “Oh, Amanda, you always took things so literally. I don’t remember what I did say.”

“You told me, a child of six, that nobody really knew what happened after death, or where Colin was. For years I pictured him trailing around the Bronx Zoo at night, alone and crying. Remember when I got lost there? That was the only place I knew of at the time where missing children might be.”

“Good Heavens,” says her mother, “I had no idea.”

Amanda pushes her hair out of her face and takes a shuddering breath. “I was afraid to ask you about anything like that again. I never felt ... safe with you. I don’t think Jonah did, either. Isn’t that how a mother is supposed to make her children feel? Secure, safe? I spent my childhood terrified of dying, of being alone. I needed to hear that I was safe, and you’d never leave me.”

Her mother clicks her tongue commiseratively. “Would it help if I told you now?”

“No, it wouldn’t,” says Amanda. Along with the memories come undefined emotions, clamouring to be named. She waits for the feeling that always stops them, and then it happens, like a broad sweep of a giant hand, blotting out the surge of images that come pressing forward from the dark, unexplored part of her mind.

“I’ve called it *behind the curtain* since I was young,” says Amanda, musing. “You never knew about that, either.”

“What’s that, dear?” Her mother’s face is serene.

“Behind the curtain – that’s where all the bad things stayed. The only thing is, that part got bigger, until I felt like I was living on the strip of stage that’s left when the curtain is down, and the place where everything was happening, the stage, was always hidden.”

Her mother reaches out a hand. Amanda feels an electric tingle as fingers brush her cheek, and starts to cry. Soon arms enfold her, and her mother’s voice whispers soothingly in her ear. Amanda tries to go with it, but it’s too unfamiliar, and eventually she pushes her mother away.

II

Amanda walks lightly along a crowded, sun-burnished street in Pamplona, her dark hair loose and swinging, her crisp white peasant blouse and skirt rustling pleasantly. A path seems to open before her as she weaves through the throng of colourful, local pedestrians: squat women carrying baskets of goods, an endless gauntlet of children whose identical dark eyes curiously meet her own.

The warmth of the sun is a kindness on her head and shoulders; she lengthens her stride as the crowd around her thins. Only the moment exists; her mind is emptied of all but sensory pleasure.

She becomes aware of some sort of commotion ahead. She hears cries and shouts, and suddenly a cloud of dust filled with the bodies of running men and boys pours into the street from a connecting square.

A thin girl materializes at her side, pulling her sleeve and crying, "Senorita, come, come, it is the running of the bulls!"

Amanda presses back into an entranceway with the girl clinging to her arm, and then the runners are upon them; all is dust and sweat, bodies and shouts and pounding feet, while a more ominous, thunderous pounding builds behind them. The girl shrieks with excitement and Amanda feels a strange elation pouring into her.

Seeing a break in the throng, she impulsively plunges into the crowd of runners. The wave picks her up and carries her along, her feet barely touching the ground; she is jostled and buffeted by elbows and shoulders. Fixing her eyes on the muscular naked back in front of her, she finds her place and runs like a deer.

Her senses refine and sharpen still more; everything recedes but the performance of her running body; each foot placed solidly, the knee bent, the springing leap forward, the reflexive thrust of an arm, the even, controlled breathing. Dust stings her eyes and throat.

Finally she becomes aware of men around her falling back, retreating to the sides of the narrow street, some leaping fluidly up on walls. Behind her she hears the thunder grow; she takes a quick glance, and through a haze of dust she sees the huge-shouldered dark forms almost upon her.

She runs in desperation now, her heart hammering her ribs. She can feel the hot breath on her neck, and taste the pungent feral smell. Terror and rage climax within her simultaneously; she stops, and turns around.

A glimpse of lowered, great horned heads, the flash of a single, red-rimmed eye, but at the moment of impact they break up and

pass over her like mist.

III

Amanda approaches the helicopter door; the wind from the blades moulds her white cotton jumpsuit to her body and blinds her with whipping locks of her own hair. Ducking beneath the blades, she climbs in, sits in the vacant seat next to the pilot. He shouts at her over the roaring engines, something about strapping herself in, and she takes a sidelong glance at his tanned profile, his handsome chiselled nose and chin. She finds her seat belt and cinches it tight. Outside, someone slides her door shut, and the noise decreases substantially.

"Ready?" he mouths, and she nods, smiling in anticipation.

"Let's go," she says, as the engine whine increases. They lift off, tipping sideways as they gain height. Amanda sees the rocky ground fall away, then level out as they skim at low altitude, until, without warning, the ground is gone, the helicopter drops, and her stomach gives a sharp lurch of vertigo at the sight of the panorama before them.

"This is Marble Canyon – we're almost at the south end," the pilot shouts.

"Fantastic!" she shouts back, thankful she didn't scream. The earth is split open beneath them, the huge cleft widening and deepening as they travel along it. She tries to adjust her perception; black shadows on the canyon walls and floor are confusing at the speed they're moving.

"It's so big!" she shouts to him, and then feels embarrassed for saying something so obvious.

The canyon has expanded to a great width now; in the space ahead of them rise reddish, striated butte walls with numerous chasms branching off in all directions.

"That's the Painted Desert," shouts the pilot, gesturing to the southeast at a pale table-land glowing with the light of the sinking sun.

The helicopter seems to have diminished in size; she can see their tiny shadow racing along the east wall of the canyon. She feels small suddenly, too small to exist in this vast place. She unbuckles her seat belt, and unfastens the safety latch on the door. The pilot stares ahead, his face expressionless. She slides open the door and tumbles out, but instead of the expected rush of air, the free falling, all sensation disappears; the images melt like watercolours in the rain.

IV

“Amanda!”

She opens her eyes. Her brother’s face is a foot from her own. It is a pale, academic face, tight features and compressed lips; like hers it is wide at the forehead, tapering to a narrow chin, but streaks of grey spring from his temples. The expression of sullen defiance he wore when he was her intimidating teen-age brother has tempered to one of irritated abstraction. She can see he’s concerned about something; his normally distant gaze is focused on her, his narrowed eyes probing. Suddenly aware of the prone position of her body, she grips at the surface under her hands. She’s lying on a thinly padded bench, and he’s leaning over her.

“Amanda, what’s going on?”

“Where am I?” she mumbles, reaching one hand out vaguely in his direction. Above her, behind his head, she sees a square of white, featureless ceiling meeting two walls, and tries to place the scene.

Jonah allows her to clutch his arm. “You’re testing programs for me, right? But they keep terminating early. I thought it was just a fluke on Bull Run, so I switched you to Grand Canyon. What’s happening?”

“Programs?” she says, lifting her head. He’s in a swivel chair beside her; next to him is a console with several screens. One is flashing silently: interrupt, interrupt, interrupt.

Amanda lifts her other hand to her head, and feels a thin, smooth, tonsure-like metal cap.

“The NVR.,” says her brother, and as she stares up at him, puzzled, he adds impatiently, “The neuro-virtual-reality receiver – you’re jacked into the system, remember?”

“But Mother?”

“Christ, Amanda, get a grip. I must have run too many in a row,” he mutters to himself.

Amanda is anxious not to disappoint him; she makes a huge effort to clear the fuzziness from her mind.

“I’m helping you test your programs,” she says slowly, repeating his words to jog her memory. Some of the tenseness leaves his face, and she remembers more.

“Mother’s dead – that was a therapy program,” she says, “I’ve been doing a lot of those, haven’t I?” She lets Jonah’s arm go and sits up. The small room is familiar now.

“Yes, yes; you had me going there for a minute – I just thought some R and R after the therapy would do you good – and we had already talked about it. But what happened?”

“I let Mother touch me this time ...” she begins, “But I couldn’t

handle it for long; it made me feel – empty, sort of numb.”

She watches him carefully. His expression is neutral, noncommittal, as it always is when their mother is mentioned. She plunges ahead, wanting a reaction from him.

“You know, I think I do that to hide how I feel. Sometimes I think ... I hate her.” It’s hard for her to say, it’s a behind-the-curtain thing.

“I tried to kill myself in the programs – I stopped in front of the bulls; I jumped out of the helicopter. But nothing happened, it all just stopped.”

Jonah frowns, gets up and paces the tiny room for a moment, then turns to her, his voice cold with sarcasm.

“I didn’t think to set them up for suicide attempts. I’m sorry I didn’t put in that contingency. They’re for entertainment, relaxation... Well, I can see I’ll have to do a series for self-destructive personalities that like to punish themselves in famous sites.”

“Well, they’re a bit overdone, don’t you think? You made them so bloody surreal – the bulls looked like they came out of an old horror-vid.”

They stare at each other, eyes mirroring anger and hurt. A wave of sadness wells up inside Amanda as she recognizes how little their relationship has changed since childhood, and yet they had a common bond of suffering. Their shared focus was their mother, for whose elusive attention they fought a covert war of jealousy. *We learned too well*, thinks Amanda. *The reason is gone, but still we can’t stop.*

“I’m sorry,” she says, but can’t resist adding, “I’ll kill myself on my own time from now on.”

He sits down again, shaking his head in defeat. “I thought you were through with all that. You’d already given it a hell of a try with the drugs, before I found you. When you said you’d come here with me, that it would help us both, I thought you meant it.”

“I did, I did,” she says, starting to cry. “I just don’t know what to do – after I talked to Mother, I felt even more disconnected. And in those other programs, when I got scared, it made me mad, and then I felt helpless... sort of invisible. And I know they’re just programs, but once I’m into them, they’re so real, I forget. Why do I get so involved?”

Jonah expels a heavy breath, and says with forced patience, “Since they’re neuro-jacked, we trigger chemical responses to complement the experience – like a flood of endorphins at the outset – just to get you off on the right foot. The fear is enhanced, the euphoria, whatever. These are intense, I know. There was so much trouble with the neuro-jacked tug pilots having destructive dreaming episodes that we

developed these to take their place. The need for dreaming is over-ridden. I guess I didn't let you ground out enough between them."

Amanda is angry again. "Well, did you ever think that maybe I wasn't up to handling them? And what about the therapy ones? I suppose they're emotionally enhanced, too, aren't they?"

He gives an oblique shrug; she can tell she's right. "You're triggering all my reactions," she says. "Christ, I feel like I've been on an manic-depressive binge."

"I thought they'd be fun for you," says Jonah stiffly. "I didn't think it would be that big a deal. And the therapy ones are for you to work out your feelings – it's a great way to experience anger. I didn't think –"

"No, you didn't think, that's just it," Amanda interrupts. "It's no wonder I tried to kill myself."

He looks at her quizzically, a half-smile bending his thin mouth. "Did you ever think that maybe it's her you want to kill, not yourself?"

Amanda's stomach tightens again, and guilt floods her, but through that guilt intrudes a tiny voice: a question. She knows from experience that once the question has been asked, like a ferret that scents a rabbit, her mind will propel her down the path to its conclusion.

"There's no bad or wrong in virtual reality, you know," he goes on, "You can act out anything you want – your innermost, most primitive compulsions fulfilled – it's very cathartic. I'll send you one tonight, if you like, in your room."

"I suppose the contingency is set up," she whispers.

"Of course," he says, turning back to the screens.

V

Amanda is in her room, the cubicle Jonah has arranged for her. She lives along the outer edge of the wheel-shaped space station, in the private dwelling section for non-tech personnel. Jonah spent some time patiently explaining the way the network functions, and she's gathered a few points, such as the fact that the station is primarily a research facility, and in a low orbit, much closer to earth than the solar satellites that supply the earth with electricity.

Jonah's primary concern is with the pilots of the space tugs. They're the backbone of the whole system, he says, shuttling fuel and other payloads between the construction platforms, propellant factories and the moon base. He showed her a tug docking when they arrived at the station, and watching the awkward looking, barrel-shaped craft's precise manoeuvres, she was reminded of some creature like a walrus or manatee, whose ungainly appearance on land only emphasizes its gracefulness in water.

He also told her she would be helping him review programs for the tug pilots, and her initial sense of having something worthwhile to do has deteriorated since she's settled in. Except for the occasional visits to Jonah's lab to run programs – most of them the therapy ones he's written for her – she spends her time alone, doing the prescribed exercise schedule, or just staying in her room. She is afraid that her excessive idle time may be her own fault, that Jonah has found her less useful or more screwed up than he thought.

Her room has no windows, but one entire wall is a screen, now displaying a penthouse view of Paris at night – full moon over the Eiffel Tower. The whole room is about the size of a walk-in closet; the kitchen unit recesses into one wall, her bed into another, the tiny bathroom stall and the door to the hallway are on the last. All is chrome and white and spotless. The screen shows impressive views from Earth, and changes every twelve hours. They have begun to repeat, she's noticed.

She's lying on the bed, drifting into sleep, when the door opens and her mother walks in. This time she is dressed in a cherry-red evening one-piece blouson and draping, gathered at the waist.

"Darling," exclaims her mother, "How are you? I know I promised we'd spend some time together this week, but an incredibly important meeting came up – imagine, it's at the French ambassador's villa, and..."

Amanda feels a flush of heat suffuse her face, her muscles tighten and poise. She fingers the knife lying under the sheet beside her, drawing her thumb back and forth against the edge.

"I'm sure you really tried to get out of it," she says.

Right before she kills her mother, her mother says something strange. With her arms raised in entreaty, she cries, "You've got to believe me, Amanda, as soon as I found out, I made sure he'd never get another chance –" But Amanda isn't listening anymore.

VI

When she wakes again, the screen has changed to a daytime scene, an alpine meadow with bright splashes of yellow and white flowers against a jagged mountain background. Amanda wants to talk to her brother. She gets up, goes over to the counter, and presses his personal number on the inset keyboard module. Seconds later his head and shoulders appear in a window centred on the wall-screen, slightly larger than life-size.

"What do you want, Amanda?" he asks, "I'm kind of busy."

"Well, I tried it last night," she tells him, knowing this will get his

attention.

“Oh, did you,” he says, his gaze focusing on her. “And what did you think? Was the graphic detail too much or did it help you act out? How about visual or physical distortion?”

“I think I feel better this time – I don’t know – more peaceful or something.” She wants to tell him about herself, not get sidetracked into the technical aspects.

“That’s good – I told you it could be cathartic. What about the detail, though?”

Amanda gives in, and thinks back, shuddering. “It was vivid – I remember the sound the knife made – ugh. I found myself losing track on and off – the anger was so encompassing it took over for a while.... I fell right to sleep afterward.”

“Emotions,” Jonah says, “are stronger than any visual or tactile stimuli.”

“It’s so randomly detailed, though,” says Amanda. “How can there be so much detail?”

“You just think it’s detailed; just as when you’re dreaming, your subconscious supplies intricate details while leaving other vast areas blank. Reality is much the same. We see the things that interest us, and are unaware of almost everything else. And it’s all computer-aided contingency – behaviours on your part stimulate certain responses – you push the programs along yourself. We provide the situation, the characters.... All the accepted human psychological data are incorporated – that’s why the array of detail seems random sometimes, almost nonsensical.” He glances away; Amanda can tell he’s ready to break off their conversation.

Quickly she says, “I was thinking, you know, I’m tired of staying in my room. I feel like getting out. Can we go somewhere, do something?”

Jonah frowns. “Amanda, I’m busy, I told you; we’re having some problems – don’t you know someone else?”

“No, I don’t know anybody; I never see anyone – even the exercise rooms are pre-scheduled for privacy.”

“Why don’t you call up Services, and ask for Connect? Do that, and I’ll see if I can block out some time later this week.” His image blinks off the screen.

The mountain scene is uninterrupted once again; Amanda sits and stares at it for a long time. Eventually she reaches down and presses the Service access number. The window appears again with the list of station services in alphabetical order. She scrolls to the C’s, and highlights Connect.

“Hello, you have accessed the station’s confidential companionship service,” says a pleasant female voice. “To view a selection of files, please indicate your choices in the following list of preferences... To add your own information to our files, please select new files and be prepared to answer—”

Amanda selects the displayed list, cutting off the voice. First things first, she thinks. She chooses male, non-tech, libertarian, non-drinker, age 25, then pauses at the depth of relationship desired scale – one being superficial, ten being intimate. She chooses three, then shrugs, and changes it to five, figuring that’s a maybe either way.

The screen indicates that there are two files falling within her range of preferences. Amanda saves the access numbers in her personal directory, then quits the program. She sighs and gets up, momentarily forgetting about the NVR. and trying to scratch her head. Damn Jonah, she thinks, putting me through this crap.

She decides not to pursue his suggestion any further, but after she’s cleaned up and eaten, she starts feeling desperate to get out, to talk to someone.

Finding a turquoise silk scarf that goes with her jeans and blouse, she ties it around the top of her head to cover the helmet, which she’s still self-conscious about. She sits down at the counter again and tries one of the numbers.

“Hello,” says a male voice with a slight accent she can’t immediately place, “I see from the code this is by way of Connect – is mutual screen okay with you?”

“Sure, why not?” says Amanda.

He appears on her screen window, the background a room identical to her own, and they examine each other. He’s attractive, she decides, with widely spaced hazel eyes and prominent facial bones that stretch his skin into interesting planes. He smiles at her, and a number of even more interesting creases form. He reminds her of an Austrian exchange student she dated for several months once; even the accent is similar. She pictures him in lederhosen and smiles back engagingly.

“Hi, I’m Amanda – this feels a bit funny – I’m new here, and I wasn’t sure—”

“That’s okay, I understand completely. I’m Peter. I’m glad you called, Amanda. You’re new here, you say?”

“Yes, I’ve only been here a month or so... Is it hard to meet people here, or is it just me?”

“It can be, I guess – or hard to meet people out of your sphere of work, anyway,” he says, “Especially if you don’t know your way

around.”

“Maybe that’s my problem. I guess I’ve been holed up in just a couple of places since I’ve been here.” He’s easy to talk to; she feels surprisingly comfortable.

“Listen,” he says, “I’m off shift for a few hours. If you’re not busy, I could show you around – I could take you to the hydroponic gardens if you’d like to see them. That’s where I work.”

“Are you sure it’s not an imposition? You didn’t have something else planned?”

“No, nothing important. Really, it will be my pleasure. Where are you?”

“I’m in Brown. Is that far from you?”

“Fairly close – why don’t you take the ‘shute to Green? I’ll meet you there.”

“Okay, thanks, Peter. In about ten minutes?”

“That will be fine,” he says, “See you soon, Amanda.” He blinks off, and Amanda smiles to herself, glad now that she took the initiative.

VII

She likes Peter a lot, she decides. After some initial awkwardness, they get along wonderfully. He always says the right thing, and she unexpectedly finds herself talking about the past, telling him about her problems with Jonah.

They’re in the hydroponic gardens, next to the rows of cabbages. Sunlight pours down from the slated reflectors in the arched ceiling, making rainbows dance in the automatic bursts of mist that shoot out of the piping above the leafy rows like tiny, upside-down geysers. Peter is a good listener. He puts a comradely arm around her and makes sympathetic noises.

“When Mother died, things just got worse – I thought we’d pull together, but he was so involved in his career, I saw him even less. And I couldn’t stand to stay in the apartment anymore.”

“How did your mother die? Was she sick?”

“No, it was a hit-and-run. She was crossing a street. They never found the person who did it. I think that would have helped, you know, I think I would have felt it was more...over, or something. I couldn’t believe it had happened; I couldn’t believe she’d left me alone for good, that time. I felt like it was my fault; I wasn’t good enough–”

Peter grimaces and rubs her shoulder. “That must have been so hard for you. What about your father?”

“My father?” Amanda stares at him, bewildered. “What about him?”

I don't remember much – he left when we were young. Anyway, I was only fifteen when she died – legal age, and Jonah was twenty-five. Soon after that I started spending my inheritance like crazy. In a couple of years, it was gone, and I had a drug habit that took lots of money. Things went downhill from there.”

“But you're okay now? I mean–”

“Yes, Jonah helped me get back on my feet; he gave me a chance here. I'm clean, by some miracle – none of the blood diseases, none of the nasty retro-viruses. I guess they don't even let you up here if you have any of that.”

Peter's hand makes longer sweeps, from her wrist to her shoulder, and she relaxes against him, sighing.

VIII

The next morning she's awakened by a voice message telling her there's an incoming call from Jonah. She gets up, rubbing her eyes, and goes over to the counter where her robe is flung carelessly across the inset keyboard. Wrapping herself in it, she clicks on the mutual screen and sits down. He appears in the window, blotting out the centre of a sunny forest glade. He looks cheerful, which irritates her.

“Well,” he says, “Did you have fun yesterday?”

“What do you mean?” she says, sliding down the bench to dial a cup of coffee from her beverage dispenser.

“Didn't you get a date or something through Connect?”

“How would you know?” She places a cup under the spigot, and pushes hair out of her eyes.

“Well, I just assumed–”

“Yes, I did have a date, yes, it was okay,” she interrupts. A thin stream of coffee slowly fills the cup.

“What did you do?” He looks interested; his voice is warm.

Amanda is gratified, but unwilling to show it. She yawns, and recites in a bored voice, “We went down to an observation deck and looked at the Earth, then he showed me the hydroponic gardens, then we went to his room, okay?”

“Well, how was it?”

“How was what?”

“The sex.”

Amanda takes a sip of coffee and gives him a disgusted look. “I don't really think that's any of your–” Suddenly she freezes as a horrible feeling grips her.

“You... It wasn't–”

“Amanda, I'm sorry I didn't tell you,” says Jonah, “but that would

have ruined it, don't you see? I had to see if it would work. It was harmless; you had a good time."

"You... bastard," she gets out. "You—I can't believe you'd..."

"Oh, come on, Amanda, think about it. You wanted a good time, I provided it, you helped me test the reality factor. It wasn't as if I knew you'd have sex with him, it was just a contingency."

Amanda wonders if she's over-reacting, and decides she isn't. "You used things you knew about me, you made him look like Ernst, you made him say things—"

"No, no, you're getting mixed up. Sure, I had his initial appearance resemble someone I thought you'd be attracted to, but he was just saying the things you wanted to hear. You propel the thing along yourself, I told you."

"But the gardens, the deck?"

"Everything's from the station, it's really easy to provide backgrounds that way. And you have to admit, he was the perfect man for you."

"Oh, boy," says Amanda. "I must be an idiot. The whole thing reeked of VR, the excitement, the sense of the moment being everything... He was too perfect."

She blushes at the thought of some of the things he said, tipping up her chin with his finger—"You have such a lovely heart-shaped face," then more playfully, "You look like a kitten."

She tries to muster some dignity. "So what would these types be for, entertainment, dream episodes, therapy, what?"

"Just about any of those, really," says Jonah. He pauses, then says confidentially, "We've been extending the NVR experiences for the tug pilots, the ones that end up doing months alone in confined quarters. Providing them with more full, complete lives – taking care of their need for companionship, sex, diversion. Even therapy for personality traits or minor trauma that the extreme conditions might exacerbate. It's lonely out there – when they're jacked into the tugs they're never off work, so to speak. There seems to be some delayed response to neuro-jacking that we're working on, trying to keep ahead of – well, anyway, the happier and more balanced we can keep them – you know."

"What does that mean, delayed response? Am I going to have side effects now? Jonah, I can't believe the way you—"

Oh, you don't have to worry – you haven't done that many programs. This is long-term. Some mnemonic surfacing, early memories, maybe even fabricated memories. We'll figure it out."

Amanda isn't ready to forgive him. She says coldly, "I'm scheduled to work out. Maybe you could tell me if you decide to do some-

thing like this again.”

“Hey, Peter’s around any time you want him,” says Jonah. “And I’m sorry, but I just had to see; you understand, don’t you, Amanda?”

He clicks off, and Amanda realizes she’s still holding her cup of coffee poised in front of her. She puts it aside; her stomach doesn’t feel up to it. She doesn’t feel like working out, either. Throwing her robe and night-shirt on the floor, she steps into the bathroom compartment.

The questions start when she’s standing in the shower, as the tiny ultra-sonic jets of water knead and massage her body. The shower stops; the programmed allotment of time up, and Amanda waits for the burst of drying air, then steps out.

She dresses hurriedly, and within minutes she’s on the way to the Observation Deck; she feels a strong compulsion to compare the real station to the one she experienced with Peter. Several uniformed people are getting on the ‘shute; one man wears an NVR They all seem occupied, on their way somewhere; their eyes slide over her without connection. She feels detached; everything is flat, two-dimensional, as if actual reality is less real than virtual.

As she enters the tubular hallway to the deck, she tries to remember details to compare, but the tunnel is plain, metal-lined, with identical inset lights on the wall every ten paces or so. The gentle curving prevents her from seeing ahead more than twenty metres at a time.

Was it so far yesterday? She was talking to Peter, of course, not noticing much else. She reminds herself that it was all just neuro-induced images and sensations, her brain receiving signals that her feet were hitting something solid, her extended fingertips touching the strip of railing, Peter’s arm brushing hers – but she can’t help feeling she was just here.

She starts to run, counting the inset lights she passes to keep herself calm. As she reaches 50, she comes abruptly upon the open door to the deck, and stops, leaning against the entrance, breathing raggedly.

Everything is the same, the two rows of chairs covered with smooth grey fabric, the giant curved window.

No blue-white Earth dominates now, though, only blackness filled with cold pinpoints of stars, the pale flush of a nebula.

She notices someone is sitting in the front row, off to the side, and sees the gleam of an NVR A small hunched man with a book or notepad on his lap turns his head slowly to look back at her, his eyes sadly questioning, like a wounded animal’s.

She is struck by the feeling that he is a victim, a tug pilot,

irreparably damaged by some combination of space and technology. She imagines him sitting here, for hours at a time, seeing the Earth, moon and stars pass by the window before him. Perhaps he tracks the shuttle approaches and departures, or counts the intermittent flashes of reflective sunlight from the solar satellites, in a futile effort to ground himself, while the station lazily spins around the Earth. She is seized by a sudden desire to go to him, to ask him if he was here yesterday, if he saw her. She imagines him saying slowly, "What, you and the gentleman?"

The fear she's been forcing down rises into her throat, choking her. Why, Jonah could send her a program any time; she might not even know. She has to see him, in person, solid. He must explain everything, reassure her.

She wheels around, and strides back down the tunnel. She tries to remember coming here, to the space-station. Her memories are haphazard, random pieces she arranges in logical sequence – Jonah recognizing her outside a Guild bar in New York, as she tries to solicit drug money – him taking her back to his hotel room, cleaning her up, giving her stuff to get her through the worst of it. The flight to Florida, then to Merritt Island, then the personnel shuttle to the research station. Safely strapped in her seat next to Jonah, stealing looks at him through the helmet, the blissful feeling that finally they would be together – be close, the way she'd always wanted.

Between the memories, she feels the intrusion of the curtain, becoming tangible, instead of just a metaphor. Deep, imperial purple, hanging in complicated volutes and folds, the heavy fabric drags on her mind.

"I made sure he'd never get another chance –" breaks in an echo of her mother's voice.

Amanda tries to ignore it, remembers getting the NVR attached; painless, as Jonah promised it would be–

She is a child, in her room. *Nanny Moon was looking through her window, but a big black shadow blocks out the light. She clutches her covers tight...* "Mommy? Mommy?" she whispers. *She feels a mouth press down hard over hers; she can feel teeth through the lips...*

Jesus, what was that? she wonders, panic surging within her. "Fabricated memories–" says Jonah's voice.

She takes the outer 'shute to the nearest junction, and then the one that rides along a spoke to the hub. Nowhere in the station does she get a sense of proportion. Like her own mind, everything feels cramped, compartmented, no section seems to overlook other sections.

Now Peter's voice, "What about your father?"

She stops in front of the emergency shut-off door and buzzes; it admits her with a gush of air. A few techs see her walk through to Jonah's lab and nod; they're used to her going in and out.

His door's lock switch is off. Relief flooding through her, she opens it without knocking, and looks in. Her relief turns to dismay; the room is empty. But the screens are on – he can't be far. She shuts the door and sits down in his chair, closing her eyes and waiting for the feeling to come and stop all the voices.

But instead of the sweeping sensation, and subsequent detached stillness, her mind's eye is filled with the curtain, solid and forboding; and now it is agitating, as if something is brushing it from behind, sending ripples of response cascading along its length.

Jonah, Jonah, she chants to herself. Emotional pressure builds inside her with the growing roiling of the curtain, pushing outward against her rib cage. Could it be? Was the memory real? Was it her father who did this? She opens her eyes and looks at the screens. One has an inventory of NVR program files up. She sees her own name several times with different assignment codes following it. She notices there is a current file up behind the menu screen, so she blinks it out, and stares into her own face.

Her image is frozen in three-quarter view. She wonders why it's there, and noticing a controller on, she tells the computer to show her the scope of the current parameter. Her image grows younger; slowly the facial bones lose their definition; the cheeks and chin grow plump and round, the head takes on the classic large-browed childish shape, the hair lightens, becomes finer. The face reaches an age of about six or seven, then reverses and flows smoothly back into its previous aspect.

Without conscious thought, Amanda reaches over to the controls and punches in her personal channel on the program transmitter, then orders it to run.

IX

She is hanging, suspended in empty space; she can feel her body, upright, but nothing else, no movement of air, no sound, no smell, no contact. All around her, a pale red colour dominates: a depthless, impenetrable colour; she might be inside a translucent, seamless sphere, it might be the colour of the atmosphere itself. She raises and lowers her arms, they move slowly against a water-like resistance; they, too, are bathed in the redness, as if by diffused, filtered light with no discernable origin. She feels huge, somehow, as if her reach could span interstellar distances.

In front of her, the colour seems to thicken, then to pulse – sporadically at first, but quickly centring itself into a swirling vortex, with a penumbra of textured waves that spread outward from it, thickening and darkening with each surge. It is vaguely obscene, she thinks, like being inside some sort of gigantic sexual organ. The strobing waves turn to black and pulse out of her peripheral vision, while new ones repeatedly form and spread. She feels a deep, soundless thrumming begin. Strange sensations pluck at the nerves in her groin; they are sexual, but do not entirely seem to conform to her.

Out of the eye comes a figure, black against the centre's redness. It walks towards her from a great distance, seemingly through mid-air; it strolls slowly, languorously, with animal patience. It is naked. She knows who it is.

She watches the figure draw ever nearer, until she can see the Amanda image's eyes; they are locked into her own, but with a voracious look she's never seen in the mirror. She hangs, waiting, while inexorably the image comes at her: an object caught in her gravitational field. It hits her like the blast of heat from a departing shuttle, engulfing her in sensations of smooth, hot flesh, hands and wet cavity of mouth and vagina. She tries to struggle, to get away, but the program has no contingencies, existing for one purpose only. Her body is helpless, caught at the peak of a violent protracted orgasm while her mind is slung away somewhere, filled with throbbing black crests that she hides behind to block out the frenzied determination of the childish body against her own.

She discovers herself back in Jonah's lab, in his chair, doubled over, retching violently, while her body is awash in the subsiding sexual aftermath.

"Oh God, oh, God," she whimpers, twisting around and clinging to the back of the chair, her head pressed against her hands. The curtain jerks violently, and she gasps as the agonizing truth hits: that she had created Jonah according to her own needs; he's no more real than the programs he feeds her. She has never had any actual knowledge of Jonah, of what he feels or wants.

The door opens, and Jonah stands looking at her, looking at the screen, his face pale. She observes the workings inside her head; how previous concepts, polar opposites, such as safe/unsafe, twist and then meld.

"We are just programs," she informs him, "I have put the rest of us away, behind the curtain." Then, "Take it off, take it off," she moans, tearing at her head. She hears him leave and come back. She feels

her arm jerk from the blast of a medi-gun, and from a distance Jonah's voice says, "Yes, we'll take it off, don't worry, Amanda, it'll be gone when you wake up."

X

It is a small room, all chrome and white and spotless. A woman lies motionless on the bed, staring at the ceiling. She continually lifts one hand to her head, as if to check for something. On the screen which covers an entire wall, the face of a man she knows as Jonah broods over the room. From time to time his lips move, and his voice comes through the speakers. It tells her about a childhood, a sanitized version that includes a father and a dog and a trip to Disneyworld.

"I could give you that childhood, Amanda, is that what you want?"

The woman on the bed does not respond.

The voice continues, "Look, Amanda, what you experienced in there, it was all an NVR thing, kind of a program within a program, don't you see? Obviously you needed to confront another part of yourself, the inner child you felt guilty about...."

The voice pauses; the woman closes her eyes. After a while the voice resumes.

"Amanda, I got carried away – I thought if I could give you a traumatic memory and then get rid of it I would finally have the control I needed.... I had to try it, for the pilots – we were losing them one after another.... I was under pressure – an investigation pending.... I'm sorry, Amanda."

Later still: "Well, where do you think I learned it? It was our father, he was the one – Oh, I've killed them both, many times. At least I made a program; I didn't use you, like he did.... I love you, Amanda, even when we were children, I –" The voice breaks off, as if it has tripped over itself.

The woman he calls Amanda lies on the bed considering the nature of a person's reality, how it is slowly built from birth onward out of experiences and memories. She considers the delicate balance of the mind, the various modes of protection it employs, and how adding or deleting memories, or inserting non-reality-based experiences, could cause a disruption. She tries to integrate these thoughts, but cannot succeed in getting beyond the intellectual. She realizes she doesn't know where she is, or even who she is. Finally she gets out of bed, and goes over to the kitchen unit. She selects a knife from a drawer. Then she presses the inset module several times, and the face blinks off the screen, replaced with the words: Voice-activated message – Proceed. She says a few words, running her thumb over

the edge of the knife. She contemplates the phrase on the screen, and decides that, although brief, it is enough. She sinks to the floor, then settles back on her heels, composing herself. Gripping the knife handle with both hands, she turns the blade in and lifts it high, beside her head, tensing her muscles for one sweeping stroke. She fixes her eyes on the screen. Before her the words pulse softly: Only in my death can I find the reality of my existence. ❖

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Creche



Illustration © 1995 by DL Sproule

by

ROBERT J. LEVY

Robert J. Levy is a poet with credentials including four published collections of poetry, an NEA Fellowship and appearances in magazines such as *Paris Review*. Little did anyone know he was honing his talents before turning his hand toward the literature of the fantastic. Now, as well as editing (he's executive editor of United Feature Syndicate) and teaching (writing workshops at Marymount Manhattan College), Robert weaves incredible tales like the dark-sf nursery story you're about to read.

Since his fantasy debut in *Amazing* (Winter, 95), he has made a number of sales including four to *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*.

We'd love to have him back in these pages someday soon.

HALF-ASLEEP, STILL GROGGY FROM HIS RECENT NAP,

Williwoo suddenly sneezed, turned grape-purple and farted himself thunderously awake. He immediately cocked one ever-wary, partially opened eye towards his largie, which slumbered fitfully on a cot against the wall. A thin line of spittle crested the largie's slack chin, which lolled on its engorged teats.

Williwoo twisted his head the other way. He was met with the blinding-white expanse of Kirbypoo's billowy, cottoned bottom thrust upward in the air one crib over. Kirbypoo was his neighbour and, currently, senior member and nexus of the room. The mere sight of Kirbypoo brought back the gloomy thoughts that had disturbed him all week: Williwoo sensed that Kirbypoo would soon be leaving them.

Williwoo noted that his neighbour had fallen asleep on his stomach, face buried deep in a tangled blanket; consequently, he was snorting and snuffling horrendously. Fearing he might suffocate, Williwoo made him turn onto his back. Kirbypoo's breathing soon eased.

For a few minutes Williwoo watched the slowly shifting patterns cast by the variegated ceiling lights through the rotating screens. Then he listened to the room's sounds – the oddly comforting clamour of stifled cries, scattered mewings, gurgles, gasps, rudimentary vowels and diphthongs. Soon he was savouring the rich, noisome nursery stew of smells: milk, spit-up, antiseptic and lotion melded into a endlessly fascinating redolent landscape.

Then there was another smell that brought him up short: he had soiled himself. Infuriated, he brought his fists angrily to his mouth, scratched his eyes, flailed his legs uselessly in the air and screamed to be cleaned.

Almost at once, his largie loomed over him – its big, blubbery, idiot face momentarily filling the world, clumsy sausage fingers grappling with catches and stays and vials of moisturizing salve.

Williwoo had been breaking in this largie for some time now; it finally seemed to know what it was doing. The last one, though, had been a disaster. Still, Kirbypoo, Sallisue and any number of the others thought he'd handled it correctly: You can't let things get too far along, or you'll end up like Bettyboo.

And no one liked to think about Bettyboo.

When the largie had finished, Williwoo sent it back to its cot, where it nibbled a heel of coarse bread and rooted around distractedly in its filthy blanket.

Williwoo played with his toes for what seemed like hours, but might have been minutes, or even seconds. He was interrupted, at last, by

Sallisue who was asking him something about her hands. She wanted to know whether they were different than toes or the same thing, or actually some kind of animal.

Williwoo ignored her. He tended to find her musings abstract and incomprehensible. Meanwhile, Kirbypoo was crying and sending a general broadcast message full of anguish. He was sobbing inconsolably about the Parents, wondering where they were, both wanting them to return and yet fearing their arrival.

There were things Williwoo didn't like to think about: Bettyboo and the Parents headed the list. He much preferred watching holograms shift and gyrate above his head. He liked the guaranteed presence of his largie, how he could feed leisurely or quickly as he chose, the way it uncomplainingly complied with his wishes. He also rather liked his own toes and fingers.

Some things, though, were difficult. Williwoo's chief problem was his enormous intelligence – the result of centuries of transgening and cloning for specialized aptitudes. It wasn't exactly his mentality that was the problem. Rather, at this early stage, his possession of the schema of an incredibly high intellect without the concomitant information or experience to channel it often left him feeling thwarted. It was like being an amazingly complex computer without any software to run.

Sometimes it was terribly frustrating. At those times Williwoo, or one of his neighbour, would set up a caterwauling that was soon echoed around the room. This might eventually turn into an interminable chorus of inchoate misery as a dozen or more roommates screamed out their incomprehension in horrific unison.

Sometimes their anger would coalesce into a single ball of fury. On a few occasions the room as a whole had directed that rage at the nearest largie with appalling (but, hard to deny, immensely satisfying) results.

On these occasions, several Parents would eventually enter the room, clean up the mess, and reprimand the room's inhabitants, making it clear that further incidents (while in one sense condoned) would be punished by removal of entertainments – holos, neural stimulators and motion simulations.

Williwoo and the others tended to slough off such admonitions, sensing that, despite their exhibited compassion, the Parents' feelings towards the largies were fraught with ambivalence. The room members also suspected that – one day, if they persevered – they would grow up to be like the Parents; they also knew instinctively they were in no danger of ever turning into largies.

The morning wore on. Williwoo was very busy. He dozed for two hours. When he woke, he examined intently the weave of the blanket partially covering him. Then some holograms came on overhead, and he spent a half-hour trying vainly to grab them out of the air.

At one point he grew hungry, so he had his largie feed him. He sucked for a good hour. Once, when he saw the largie's attention flag, he chastised it by biting down sharply on its nipple. The largie yelped and paid closer attention to what it was doing after that.

Williwoo tried several times to communicate with Kirbypoo, but he seemed upset and distracted, and would not receive his messages. In fact, the whole room was a bit distraught today, probably because they all sensed, at some low level of cognition, that Kirbypoo had grown too old for the room and would soon be leaving.

The signs had been there for days now. Several Parents had entered the domicile last week to examine Kirbypoo. They hovered over his crib, measuring him, sticking things in him, attaching things to him, taking notes with flashing light pens in thin air. Everyone in the room knew that all this activity signalled an imminent leavetaking.

Whenever there was a departure it affected the whole room. One result of several hundred years of genetic engineering was that, beyond a certain intelligence level, rudimentary psi abilities began to appear. Thus, the room frequently seemed to operate like a single mind – not a harmonious one, to be sure, but one trying desperately to pull itself apart in many directions at once. When there was a departure, the room had to reform around a different nexus. It was a painful process that took time and energy.

It was during just such a period – when the entire room was thoroughly agitated and at loose ends – that Bettyboo had foolishly allowed background control of her largie to slip.

Williwoo remembered it well. He had been wailing nonstop for hours, fretfully trying to find a more secure linkage with Kirbypoo and Judyroo (since departed), when he heard the blood-curdling shrieks from the far corner of the room. By the time everyone had focused their attention on Bettyboo's plight, it was over. The largie stood over the crib, its hands still holding the blood-covered metal pipe, a startling look of violent self-awareness having returned to its visage. (Largies could think, of course, though they were not terribly bright; but they were willful and, obviously, dangerous.)

Everyone sought out Bettyboo, but there was no longer any connection to be made, so they turned their collective attentions on the errant largie.

What they did to the largie felt good. It felt bad, too, just a little.

Then, soon enough, it lost any meaning, and the room was busy with other things, like the newest holograms, more eating, more excreting. Later, some Parents came in and cleaned up the mess.

Parents were always cleaning up messes.

That was exactly the sort of occasion Williwoo was trying hard not to think about as he busily jammed his entire hand into his mouth to see how far back it would go.

Just then the door opened and two Parents walked in. They were tall and regal, terribly beautiful, smelling impossibly clean. They walked over, as everyone knew they would, right to Kirbypoo's crib.

Kirbypoo howled and sought out his neighbours – Williwoo among them – who half-heartedly tried to send comfort. The fact was, they were afraid. The departures tended to sever the room's solidarity, pulling the members asunder even before the leavetaking actually took place, instilling a sense of inconsolable fear and loss. Williwoo listened to the Parents murmur, a soothing drone that conveyed only morsels of sense.

They moved silently about the room, stopping at one point before Williwoo's largie, who was now hunkered on the floor. When the largie saw the parents approach, it cringed, breath becoming shallow, backing away as though trying to sink into the wall.

Staring down at the cowering largie, the tall, pale, female Parent with the long, silvery hair messaged the other. Williwoo caught some of their communication ...

Sometimes I regret the ship ever passed through the Sol system.

How so? returned the other, an 8-foot-tall male with lavender eyes and impossibly kingly bearing.

Oh ... it's nothing.

No, please go on.

Well ... these "wet nurses" ... doesn't it ever pain you to look at them? I mean, I recognize their low intelligence, but they seem so ... well, so much like us at some earlier stage. It makes me sad to see them reduced to this.

Yes, I'm not made of stone, you know. I've felt the same at times. But facts are facts. Earth was a dying ecosystem. In a few thousand years it would have been little more than a toxic cinder. The humans would have had no time to transcend and would have perished. Look at it this way: It was a miracle to have discovered that somewhere, in some distant past, we had common ancestry. And through a strange quirk their females' milk is compatible with our infants' digestive tracts. Instead of erasing the whole civilization, at least we have saved a few hundred females to clone for nursing. Think of it as an experiment in the preservation of a moribund species.

Oh, I know all that. I've heard it a thousand times. It still doesn't make me feel right about it. I mean, left uncontrolled, they can think, after a fashion.

Then you should be thankful they are not allowed to think. Imagine what they would have to ponder ... the complete annihilation of their world and of their kind, the total erasure of meaning. I doubt they'd take much solace in knowing they are providing care and sustenance for our young.

The female was silent for a time. *Have you ever considered that we are monsters?*

The male looked her, and laughed. *Of course we are. But even monsters must find ways to survive. You want to see real monsters ... take a look around you. Twenty-five cloned warriors. In a few weeks I'd be terrified to enter this room unaccompanied.*

I suppose you're right.

I know I am. Come, I've a superb meal waiting for us on the forward deck ... and a flask of amber wine you won't soon forget.

The Parents exited through a far door, leaving Williwoo confused and anxious. Soon there was a commotion, and two different Parents entered holding a portable carrier. The whole room set up a chorus of wailing. These two had clearly come for Kirbypoo.

As they neared his crib, the room sent out wave after wave of hate against them. Williwoo led the charge. The twenty-five inhabitants of the room flung every vile, painful, excruciating thought they could muster at the Parents. They sent images of maiming, of torture, of mashed and mangled body parts, of piercings and gougings and twistings. They sent out pure, imageless malice, too: raw, insensate, undifferentiated pain in relentless heaving swells.

But the Parents knew their children well. They deflected it all effortlessly with lovely, undulating thoughts about warm fuzzies, trilling color wheels, purring balls of fur and a delicious inundation of wonderful smells and tastes. The room, engulfed in the sudden deluge of sensory stimulation, lost its focus and soon became peaceable.

By the time the room had recovered its equilibrium, the Parents were gone – and with them Kirbypoo.

The usual panic set in. Some members howled uncontrollably. Others raked their eyes and cheeks with sharp fingernails. Everyone was desperately seeking out a new nexus.

For his own part, Williwoo felt near to exploding. It was as though every neuron in his tiny body were firing contradictory messages all at once. He was hot, cold; hungry, bloated; wet, dry.

Williwoo's distress triggered the ingrained reactions in his largie. It

slowly rose to its feet to check on its charge. Williwoo – miserable, thinking in a thousand directions at once – did not even notice its approach. As the largie neared him, it began to bare its breasts, assuming Williwoo needed feeding. But then, uncharacteristically, it stopped to stare into the crib. In the ensuing pandemonium, Williwoo's background control had faded, and the largie was actually seeing Williwoo for the first time.

The largie, its eyes clearing, looked at the screaming thing in the crib. It was silvery coloured, with an oddly porous, scaly sort of flesh. Its face was oddly deformed – or rather, not deformed, but evolved far beyond any face the largie's mind could comprehend. The mouth was almost vestigial, as though talking had outlived its usefulness. The eyes were narrow, evil little slits, lashless and smooth, and from within their depths radiated a cold, green-blue bioluminescence.

Williwoo continued to scream out his ruin and misery, forgetting entirely about the largie, which continued to examine him with increasing intensity. As Williwoo's screams grew louder, he turned several shades of purple, alternately gasping for breath and erupting in loud keening wails.

The largie suddenly knew where it was, and – in some crude way – what had happened to itself, to all of its kind. It also knew, ever so vaguely, why it was here. With that knowledge came a murderous impulse, and a sudden resolve.

Williwoo screamed his loudest scream. The largie quickly reached over the crib barriers and wrapped a small blanket around his neck, twisting it into a tourniquet, pressing with all its force on his windpipe – or what would have been his windpipe had Williwoo been human.

What the largie was doing hurt Williwoo terribly, of course – but that was all. In truth, it was not even particularly life-threatening. Williwoo was suddenly brought out of his misery by this assault on his existence. Quickly whipping his head around, he stared at the largie.

Bettyboo, was his first thought.

No. He would not let that happen to him.

While the rest of the room moaned and yowled, Williwoo gathered his wits about him, regaining control of the largie.

Now Williwoo knew the solution to his anger and frustration over Kirbypoo's sudden leavetaking. Now he knew how to obtain a form of satisfaction.

He flung the largie back against the wall, momentarily stunning it. Then he heaved it forward again, its mind now fully under his control. With more effort of will than he had ever exercised before, he forced the largie to smash its head against the side of his crib. The force of it

sent Williwoo rocking merrily back and forth. Once, twice, thrice, again and again, harder each time, Williwoo made the largie beat a mindless tattoo against the metal slats until the crunch of bone and the moist, meaty slap of what lay beneath became a lulling rhythm.

Williwoo kept this up until the connection faded. The thud of the largie's body slumping to the floor filled Williwoo with a sense of release, a perception that, in some fashion, he had avenged Kirbypoo's departure. He breathed deeply and, in moment of exquisite triumph, urinated torrentially and warmly into his diapers.

He had hardly finished his victory celebration when voices crowded around him: the other room members seeking him out, rallying around him, giving themselves over to his control.

He was the new nexus, it seemed. Suddenly, it felt right that he should be so, and only correct that Kirbypoo departed when he did. It had all been leading up this, hadn't it?

The door opened, and the two Parents who had removed Kirbypoo came in and went directly to Williwoo's crib. They peered in over at him and messaged each other.

Have someone clean up this mess, one said, gesturing at the body on the floor.

Right. Well, this little guy is coming along, eh?

Absolutely, and at a faster rate than we'd hoped.

He'll be a soldier before you know it.

Well, that's the idea, isn't it?

Yes, the Parent sighed. I'm afraid so.

The Parents left quietly, dimming the lights.

The room was calm now.

Every once in a while a member would become agitated, or wet, or hungry, and these thoughts would waft into Williwoo's consciousness, supplicating, asking for relief and mercy, and he would dutifully send out consolation, or encouragement – whatever was needed. He soon drafted one of the other largie's to become his personal nurse, and then he divided another largie up among two of the youngest members.

It would be OK, thought Williwoo. This was the way things ought to be. It was his birthright, and he could do as he wanted.

And he would.





Illustration © 1995 by Kenneth W. McCool

TUT RE-EXAMINED

by NANCY BENNETT

Oh gold and brilliant pharaoh
love's lost energy, magnetic moulds and plated masks.
Leave your eyes unforgivingly staring
through eternity's mirror (For there is always time
to rise again)
Young, laid here, your last gasp of lilies' sweet perfume
strung around your throat.
Now here you lie, unwrapped and cold
blackened ears snapped off so you could not hear
the screaming of those you curse.
Your penis, erected bent like a brittle twig
taken for a trophy.
Oh for those poor mortals who would make eunuchs out of gods
you have no pity.
The black leopard leads you back, a fluid gold shadow
of a mystic prince...
deadly sand in the hot Nile night
seeking to spin an unholy storm of vengeance.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

John Barrick is a 26 year old artist, writer and rock musician who plays full time in a Maryland band called Counterfeit. John has published art in *Dead of Night & Transversions #2* and has work coming up in *Weirdbook*. His published stories have appeared in *Satire* and *Eclipse* magazines. He refused to tell us his prison number. He's married, has hairy feet ("yeah, that's gross but I'm married so it doesn't matter" - JB), shares his birthday with Frodo and Bilbo Baggins, and dreams of living to the ripe old age of eleventy-one.

Cathy Buburuz creates gorgeous, versatile page jewellery, a talent – 99 out of 100 editors agree – worth its weight in diamonds.

Ian Cooper is a Victoria artist whose work has appeared in *Psychedelic Illuminations*, *TransVersions #2* and other publications. Most of his work (including the illo on page 42) is available as 18"x24" posters on 100 lb. acid-free stock for \$15.00 (US or Can). His catalogue is \$3.00. Order from Transient Visions, PO Box 5362 Stn B, Victoria, BC V8R 6S4.

AnnDel Farrish lives in Port Renfrew, British Columbia with her husband Joe and numerous pets and whoever needs a place to sleep. She works 4 jobs and still has time to do her wonderfully detailed illustrations. Her illustration "The Wood Witch" graced the cover of *TransVersions #2* and she is currently working on a large commissioned piece.

The incredible **GAK** lives in Philly, but says "yo" less frequently than Rocky Balboa. He also draws "much" better than Rocky. In fact, he's...well...incredible. In addition to *TransVersions #3*, his work has appeared in *Black Market*, *Fringewear Review*, *Factsheet 5*, *Subliminal Tattoos* and many more worldwide.

Kenneth McCool writes very short letters, so all we can tell you is that he has had work in *Transversions #3* and has recently sold at least 3 pieces to at least 2 other magazines.

Sister **Lorri McMullen** AOCA has been expressing her creative visions in a multitude of artistic disciplines for over a quarter of a century. After travelling widely, she now resides with her husband and children in Victoria, BC. Sis. Lorri works chiefly as a commissioned portrait artist, creating large canvas works as well as ceramics, handpulled prints and wall murals. Inquiries at Studio 23 (604) 384-2807.

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