

VOLUME 1 NUMBER 3

# TRANSVERSIONS



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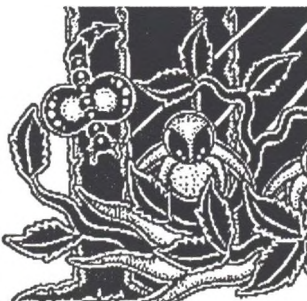
# TRANSVERSIONS

## #3



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Front & Back Cover by DLSproule



## EDITORIAL - Sally McBride

**A lot of science fiction and fantasy gets published that, if you** take a close look, isn't really speculative or fantastic at all. It's a mainstream tale dressed up with an alien setting, or some psychic shenanigans, or whatever seems necessary to make the thing sell to a genre publication. But under the trappings lies a story that could as easily happen in the mundane world of general fiction. This is okay by me when I'm in a less-than-rigorous mood—as long as it's done with style.

But what about the other side of the coin? Can a work of fantasy or sf slip out of its robes, scales and pressure suits, don business attire and masquerade as mainstream? I think it can and often does.

Fantasy fiction, according to definition, deals with the impossible. The exploration of the impossible may equate to the use of magic, time travel, or miraculous (because it can't be done yet) technology; or it may, I think, find expression in the absurdities of life itself. Life as we humans live it, or try to live it. We struggle every day with the most basic tropes of fantasy and science fiction: alienation, the quest for meaning in an indifferent or hostile universe, acceptance of the different, exploration of the strange. In *TransVersions* you'll find stories of all kinds, but what they have in common is their exploration of the soul and all its impossibilities, whether it belongs to an alien wearing human clothes, or a human clad in alien skin. What could be more alien to most of us fortunate ones than the plight of Onie, in "Divorcing Heavenlea"? Is asteroid mining any more unearthly a vocation than that of "The Woman Who Drew Dead Babies"?

I've said it before and I'll say it again: mainstream fiction is just another tributary leading into the ocean of sf; where the waters mingle is where most of the evolution happens. So though you'll find lots of the more traditional kinds of speculative fiction here, you'll also run across stories that may seem to be swimming upstream. And, before this flood of metaphors gets any more turbulent, I'll paddle aside and let you dive in. ❖

*In a recent letter to our poetry editor, Phyllis Gotlieb, Sally casually mentioned that a poem, if you turn it on its side, looks kind of like a little cityscape. Phyllis lives in Toronto, Sally in Victoria, two very different cities, but the connection was made.*

## If You Turn A Poem ON ITS Side by Phyllis Gotlieb

IT FORMS A LITTLE CITYSCAPE HERE A SHADOWED GARAGE OR NEON-LIT CAS STATION THERE A CHURCH CLOCKED & BELL TOWERED AND LO: THE GRAND HALLS OF GOVERNMENT BUT NOW I LIVE LOW RISE

## EDITORIAL - DALE L. SPROULE

Over the years, I've convinced myself that I don't like short-short stories. So when we ended up with this issue full of them, I had to stop and ask myself how it happened.

I mean, how many great ones can you think of? Lisa Tuttle's "Wives" and Hemingway's "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" and Matheson's "Born of Man and Woman"...the more I thought about it, the more stories I remembered. Ellison, Barthelme, Bierce, Carver, Chekhov, Borges & Cortezar all published volumes of them.

Obviously my initial assumption required considerable modification.

Most of the great short-short stories are by great short-short story writers. That's profound, eh? Actually, it's one of my better attempts at profundity.

The ability to write a genuinely good short-short is rare, and yet it is precisely the product demanded by vast majority of magazines in the small press. I shake my head when I read small press listings that ask for deep, character driven stories with solid plots - 2,000 words maximum. Those are precisely the short-short stories I don't like; stories which try to hard to meet these sorts of demanding criteria without realizing the limitations of the form or taking advantage of its strengths. Most of the great short-shorts tell their stories through combination of of implication and visceral effect.

While a few stories in this issue are too long to formally be considered short-shorts, only one is over 4,000 words. All are moody, but all capture different moods. While many are wistful and melancholy, others are playful. One of them elicits such a strong sympathetic reaction that I still flinch as I read it.

So, here is an issue full of very short stories that I really like.

Did I ever mention how much I hate long poems? Well, except for "Beowulf" and the "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and "Lamia" and "The Wasteland" and "Howl" and then of course, there's... ❖



**DALE L. SPROULE**  
**Sally McBride** - Editors

**Phyllis Gotlieb** - Poetry  
Editor

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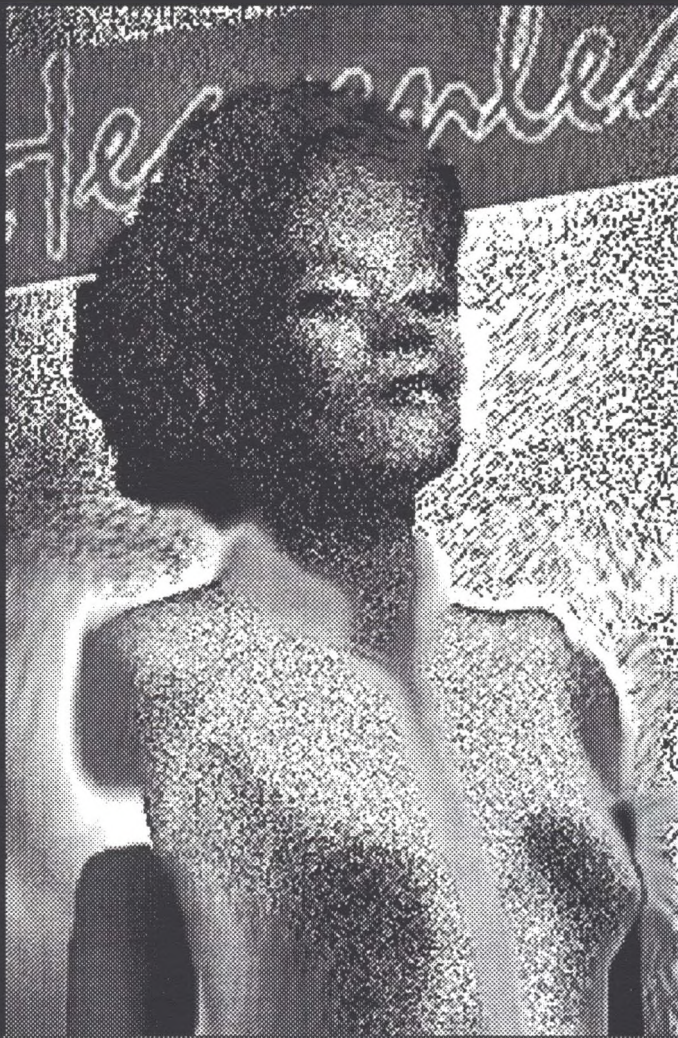
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# DIVORCING



# • H E A V E N L E A

by MARY KAY LANE

Mary Kay Lane says she is primarily a writer of fantasy and horror with work published in *Just Write* and *Dark Iowa, Bright Iowa*. We have no idea if she has arms, legs, white or black skin...but we do know that whether or not this story comes from her personal experience, it is a true story - in the sense that it is one of the most honest and touching we have ever received.



## **I hate to admit it, but I watched the Heavenlea Harrison**

Show today. I get tired of learning languages of countries I'll never visit, reading poetry I'll never understand, trying to figure out the reality behind imaginary numbers, even though that's what the doctors say I should do.

"Your mind is sharp, Onie. You don't need arms and legs to improve your mind."

They're right, of course, but sometimes I just have to watch Heavenlea. Isn't that some kind of a name for a white lady? She comes on in the afternoon when everyone else in the ward is sleeping, but I don't get tired much.

I don't remember what her topic of the day was—lesbian parents or vampire-accountants or something. I wasn't watching the other people. I was watching Heavenlea.

Heavenlea's just beautiful, you know. She's got all that red hair done up in a carefully orchestrated mess. I imagine I could have hair like that if I could only stand to have someone touch my head. The nurses were always trying to mess with my hair, so I made them shave it all off.

I think a lot about her husband Wilbur and I wonder how he can put up with her. She called him "baby" once on national television. Like, "Hi, Baby," in a for-mothers-only kind of voice. He only smiled from where he stood in the shadows behind the seats, his grin looking so tightly screwed on that I thought it might pop off any second.

Heavenlea's skinny now, too. I bet she'll even stay that way this time. His woman has no faults. That must be really hard on Wilbur. I'm skinny, too. I hate being fed like an infant. Heavenlea's perfect, right down to her dysfunctional childhood. Sometimes I think people make those memories up.

I can fabricate memories, too. Sometimes I actually believe I used to run through meadows and climb trees and squish mud through my toes and that I used to have nice parents. I can't believe how many people think up horrible things their parents did. Am I the only one who makes up memories of nice parents?

My mama died from bleeding too much when I was born. She had time to give me my name, Oneida Marie Rose Jackson, before she died. Pretty big name for a baby that wasn't much more than a big head on a little stick. She probably never even knew how I came out. My mamma took that drug that messes up babies, thalidomide. My pop couldn't handle me much. He called me his little Ping-pong paddle, because that's what I'm shaped like. He put me in a home when I was four.

"How are we feeling today, Onie?" Nurse Greensborough asked as the soft music of the Heavenlea Harrison Show's theme played and the credits scrolled by on the television.

"I'm a litte pooped from that jog around the hospital," I said. "But other than that I'm okay." Nurse Greensborough laughed. I like Nurse Greensborough. She doesn't take me too seriously. She held me up while she fluffed my pillows. She's short and wiry, but her arms are all sinewy muscle.

"Up or down?" She asked.

"Up. And can you bring me my typewriter, please?" I asked, deciding to

be nice to her today.

"Sure 'nuff," she said, wheeling the bed tray up to my face. She retrieved the typewriter from the closet and put it under my nose. "What are you going to write?"

"A fan letter," I said.

"To who?"

"Whom. Wilbur Harrison."

Nurse Greenborough looked at me with her eyebrows pushed together.

"You know," I said. "Heavenlea's husband."

"Oh, him," she said. "Well, good luck. Let me know if you need any help."

"Sure 'nuff," I said as she left the room.

I wrote to Wilbur and said I didn't think a black man belongs with a woman like her. I told him I'm on his side. I told him I'd never call him "baby" in front of the whole world. I could do wonders for you, I wrote. You're a shrinking violet next to her. Next to me, you'd be the man you should be. Before I signed off, I told him that if I were him I'd dump that woman before her hair got any bigger or she got even prettier or skinnier or wealthier.

Of course, that's easy for me to say, I'm not in the spotlight. Can you imagine the wrath that would befall him if he were to dump the prettiest, richest, skinniest white woman in the world and come running to me—the skinniest, baldest, limbless-est black lady in the world?

Yes, I wrote to Wilbur but I didn't tell him I typed his letter with my nose.

The doctors tried to give me legs once, back in '75. But I told them my stumps suit me just fine. In 1993, they tried to hook me up to a computerized robot that would be my hands. They said that way I could type faster and I said, "The tip of my nose suits me just fine."

Now the doctors pretty much leave me alone. They think I'm crazy for lying here all day when I could be seeing the world. But then, the world would see me. From my dark little corner, with no attention on me, I can dole out wisdom to Wilbur.

A week and a half after I wrote to Wilbur, Nurse Greensborough came waltzing into my room during the Heavenlea Harrison Show waving around a piece of paper.

"Mail call," she said.

"Shh," I hissed. I didn't want to miss a word of the show. Heavenlea was interviewing Daniel Day Lewis, my hero ever since watching "My Left Foot." Great movie but a little melodramatic.

I mean, the guy had feet!

"I think you'll want this letter, Onie. It's from Wilbur." She winked at me, only because she knew I could never slug her.

"Big deal," I said. "It can wait." Only it couldn't, really, but I didn't want Nurse Greensborough to know that. "Just leave it here."

She opened the envelope for me but didn't take the letter out. "Suit yourself," she said, leaving the letter on my tray. After she left the room, I tore the letter out with my teeth and set it in front of me.



It really was a letter from Wilbur. Hand written. He said he liked my letter and it made him laugh and that he'd never gotten one like it before. He said he knew I was in a hospital because of the return address and that he hoped I'd be home soon. Ha!

At least he didn't promise me tickets to the Heavenlea Harrison Show or anything.

I laid my head down on the letter and inhaled deeply trying to get a scent of him.

Just when the Heavenlea Harrison show was starting, about two weeks after the letter from Wilbur, Nurse Greensborough poked her big head around the corner and said I had a visitor.

"Is it one of them?" I asked. That's what I call people who think they are like me, but aren't really.

She nodded. "It's a lady. With three kids."

"Tell them to go away."

I get lots of visitors like that. Some of them come with a baby bouncing on their knees (if they have knees) just to show me how normal their lives are. They have husbands and jobs and kids, which is normal for them.

"Stop hiding, Oneida," they say. "Stop being ashamed." They remind me of my 155 IQ and tell me I'm wasting away and that I should educate people, stand for something.

"I can't stand for nothing," I say. "I ain't got no legs," even though I know it's not proper English. I laugh. They don't.

They roll out of my room, shaking their beautifully coiffed heads and asking the nurses to wipe their noses with lace hankies. As they leave, I swear at them in Japanese and smile like I'm telling them to have a nice day.

One day I wrote back to Wilbur and told him I had to type with my nose because I don't have arms and legs. I pointed out that I was perfectly happy this way and not to be pitied. He wrote back and said Heavenlea wants me on her show.

That night I dreamed that Wilbur came to the hospital to see me and he fell madly in love with me. He caressed my bald head and ran his fingers over my stumps. I woke up, for the first time in my life, in a tangle of soaked sheets—quite a feat for someone without arms and legs to flail around.

The first thing I did in the morning was write to Wilbur and say I'd be on the show only if he promised to come with me. I said I wasn't sure I could face her alone.

I was in make-up for two hours. I fought those gorgeous, young, earringed boys every inch of the way. They wanted hair. I said no hair. They wanted make-up, I said no make-up. They wanted to put me in a wheelchair. I told them God did not mean for me to be mobile. This is me, I said. Love it or leave it.

They were all for leaving it; I'd offended every fiber of their effeminate little beings. But Wilbur pulled me aside, whispered in my ear, "Do it for me, Onie," and I said okay to the hair, but not to the makeup or the wheelchair.

The other guest on the show was Dorothy Simms, a woman who had come to visit me once. She was a passionate defender of the rights of people with

special needs, as she calls us. She had kids she couldn't hold, she had a car she couldn't drive, she had a husband whose butt she couldn't wrap any legs around. And she was exceedingly proud of it.

"You are simply going through denial, Oneida," Dorothy said, in her best I-have-a-therapist, I-should-know voice. She spoke to the camera, not to me.

"I am not."

"You are, too."

"What, exactly, am I denying then?"

"Yeah, what?" asked Heavenlea.

"She's denying that this actually happened to her."

"Oh, I know it happened, all right," I said. "I've known now for, say..." I pretended to do calculations in my head. "About thirty-six years." The audience laughed.

"Then you're denying you are bitter about it," Dorothy said. "It's all a stage we have to get through."

"I am not bitter," I said.

"Then why don't you improve yourself?"

"But I'm perfect," I said, and the audience laughed again, only this time I wasn't trying to be funny.

"How do you feel, Dorothy, when you look at Oneida?" Heavenlea asked.

"I'm embarrassed," Dorothy said. "I'm ashamed. She's bringing shame to all the physically challenged people in the world."

I said she may be physically challenged, but I was a freak.

"Why, exactly, does she offend you, Dorothy?" Heavenlea asked.

"Doesn't she have the right to live as she pleases?"

"Not when it reflects so badly on those of us who have really tried to fit in. We don't want people to think of us as freaks, but her attitude only prolongs that myth."

A fat lady with a Bible stood up in the audience and said, "Don't be ashamed, Oneida. God loves you just the way you are."

"So do I," I said. "Why can't she?" And if I'd had a thumb, I'd have pointed it at Dorothy.

I tried to convince the audience that Dorothy and I were the same, really. We were both happy. Different, but happy.

"You don't know happiness, Oneida," Dorothy said. "You think you do, but you don't."

Was I happy? I liked myself okay, I guess. But maybe that isn't the same thing.

A person from the audience stood up. "Don't you feel like a prisoner in the hospital? Don't you ever get out? Don't you have friends? I don't see how someone can be truly happy if they don't have any friends. It must be so lonely."

Friends? I hadn't thought I needed them, really. I had nurses, and they were okay as long as they didn't mess with my head. And as far as lonely went, I had plenty of visitors and all they did for me was remind me of how miserable I should be.

"Don't you want a normal family? Kids? Someone to love?"

“How am I supposed to care for a child?” I asked. “I have no arms to hold a baby with. I have no legs to run after a kid who’s running into the middle of the street.”

“But we all did it, Oneida,” Dorothy said, gesturing to her wheelchair-bound friends in the front row. “You can too.”

The audience clapped. I hated them all—the ones in the wheelchairs, the ones with crutches, the ones with canes, the ones who just came to gawk.

I hated them for making me want something. I’d never wanted anything before. I’d never even really wanted to live, so everything I had was like a gift. And now, for the first time, I felt like I didn’t have enough.

I had gone on the show to try the impossible. I had tried to stand. And one hour on *The Heavenlea Harrison Show* destroyed me—reduced me to nothing more than what I really was: a big head on a little stick.

I cried. On national television, without hands to hide my face in, I cried. A stage hand came out with a wheelchair for me. I would have let them put me in it.

Then Wilbur came out and made them take the wheelchair away. He hugged me, wiped my nose with a silk handkerchief, put it back in his pocket! and kissed my thin lips very lightly. I thought Heavenlea’s sea green eyes were going to pop out of her head. Wilbur picked me up in his arms and carried me off stage.

I thought for a moment that he was going to say he loved me and wanted to leave her for me, but he didn’t.

After I got back to the hospital, I was suddenly aware of my body. It had never really concerned me before. I realized just how useless it was, as a body goes.

I couldn’t even concentrate on my language tapes. They used to flow through me and my mind would absorb them. Now, my formerly disciplined mind began to wonder what it would feel like to have an itch on the bottom of one’s foot. I’d heard that it is quite maddening.

Wilbur kept writing me and asking if he could visit me. I couldn’t write back for a long time. I kept thinking how a nose isn’t meant to type.

I was so in love with him it hurt everywhere, even where I thought I had nothing to hurt. Maybe it was just the kind of love women have for their doctors, or their children’s doctors. They fall in love with their saviors.

But I knew Wilbur was just another thing in life I couldn’t have. Even if he did love me, I couldn’t have him. I couldn’t let him divorce Heavenlea.

Finally, when I could feel the desperation in his letters, his need to see me, to know I was okay, I wrote him back.

I felt foolish, for the first time ever, pecking at a keyboard with my nose like a chicken picking up corn. I told him he could never leave that saint of a woman, Heavenlea Harrison. The world would hate him. I knew what it was like to be hated by the world. I told him that the wrath of the public is harder to endure than hunger, handicap, deformity. The cure is worse than the disease.

His letters stopped coming.

I miss him.

But I can’t watch Heavenlea Harrison anymore.





# ODD NIGHT

AT THE ESQUIMALT INN



Illustration © 1995 by DLSproule

by **CHARLES A. McEvoy**

This story hit us where we live—literally—the Esquimalt Inn is about one kilometre from our house (although we have yet to actually meet Charles McEvoy). Esquimalt is a West Coast native word for "place of shoaling waters". Inhabited by the Songhees people, Esquimalt (now part of the city of Victoria) has always been a place filled with spirits.

## **First Wednesday of the month is Odd Night at the Esquimalt**

Inn. God knows, you see all kinds of stuff that's kind of different on those nights, but this Wednesday was just straight out weird.

I arrived around seven to find a fair crowd already gathered. My customary table, which takes good advantage of the acoustics while still within reach of the bean pot (I'm on the wagon) was already taken. Having to sit much nearer the stage, I was forced to rely on Jennifer for my coffee. As she approached I smiled in greeting and asked, "What's new for tonight?"

"Couplebeer Walkinspeed's comin'," she replied.

"Who?"

"Couplebeer Walkinspeed. Everyone's talkin' 'bout Couplebeer Walkin'...(giggle).

"What does he play?"

"Don't know, I've never actually seen the guy. To be honest, tonight's the first time I ever heard of him."

While the usuals played their usual stuff I asked around about this unknown that everyone had heard of but none actually seen. The only thing anyone knew was a name. Couplebeer Walkinspeed...? Damned odd, yup!

'Bout 9:15, and my third cup of coffee, a smell hit me that was both repulsive and thrilling; a feral smell of animals and moss, of deep woods cedar and lush new growth. Turning in my chair I observed an apparition approach the stage. Toweringly tall and thread thin, hair and beard entirely unkept; he didn't look or smell wholly tame.

With several long strides he'd mounted the stage, then sat cross-legged on the floor, front and centre.

Stompin' Jay, the bass player, just grinned and shook his head. In retrospect I think I was lucky to have been so close to the stage.

My eyes moved to the bag he was reaching for. I'm almost certain it was made from woven cedar bark, as I've seen that material on several occasions and have always admired its unexpected softness and strength. It was guitar shaped, so I assumed it would contain that self-same article, but what emerged was something best described as torn from a tree and electrified.

The body, shaped like an asymmetrical Ovation with cysts, appeared to be a hollowed out and highly polished burl of some light coloured wood.

An improbably long, thick neck thrust away from the sound chamber, ending at the head in a finger-like projection carrying two extra, heavy-gauge bass strings. A tall, thin bridge on the body raised them up from the other six in a peak, like cello strings.

As he cradled the thing in his lap, subtle details nibbled at my consciousness. Indeed, on peering closely I saw that the protrusion at the head of the instrument looked like an inverted beak; yes, the head of a goose maybe. The lines of polished wood swept down the neck to join the body where, twisting and swirling, they resolved themselves as bent, tortured feathers.

The whole damned thing was a single piece of wood that looked for all the world like a swan, lying dead on its back. Shit, if you squinted it even had feet!

Reaching behind himself, he grabbed a patch cord and by the time that

plug clicked home you could have heard the beards grow. His last act before beginning to play was to grasp in his teeth a shortened, modified violin bow. His impossibly long fingers wrapped themselves around the neck, and as his thumb bore down on the bass strings the room resonated to something new.

A series of quarter tones floated away from the stage and I realized the instrument was designed around a thirty-two note scale. Encapsulated in baroque, the strident thrum of bass so low I heard it through my bones supercharged the flashing metal riffs, feeling like cool sweet air in my nostrils, somehow.

Shades of the Blue Mountain Boys wove in and out as his head bobbed rhythmically, his bow coaxing bone-bass subtleties while both hands strummed, plucked, chorded. Acoustic... Electric... Fantastic.

His music poured over us in pulses, ever changing, ever the same. If music has colours they were there, warm pastels in a neon frame. Lyricless, his music was a living, breathing thing. If his music were a tree, it would have been all of it. Roots thrust deeply in moist cool earth, rocks gripping tightly when the wind sings its own song through branches high above, and the dulcet purl of songbird harmony.

Then as black clouds shadowed the verdant stage, electric fires caressed the forest, the room. We all felt it, and as the pitch rose so did the hair on the nape of my neck. Flames licked and spun over wrinkled bark; I could almost feel the heat, smell the smoke. I *did* feel a tiny trill of terror when some needled boughs burst aflame; I thought my hair was on fire for a second.

A doe and fawn crashed through some discordant underbrush in a shower of heavy metal sparks. Panic and horror filled their eyes and mine.

Slowly, steadily the aural smoke cleared, supplanted by a pattering rhythm, a refreshing spring rain running down my back that grew to a solid downpour. The music hammered cool wetness against my face, ran down my cheeks and neck, down to the forest floor where it linked up with a slower sub-tempo that had been swimming back and forth unnoticed like the trout in the brook below. The high, piercing cry of an eagle rang out as an A minor sun burst full upon the room.

The song ended there, by the brook in the forest, with a keening mournful note. A songbird lay in pathetic pose, its little body charred and twisted in heat agony.

It took me a moment to come back to myself, and in that moment Couplebeer Walkinspeed slipped away unnoticed. Looking about I saw several men and women drying their eyes as other, tougher patrons returned to their beer.

If one day you catch a scent that is entirely alien to the city and civilization, follow it. Some amazingly emotive-manifest, Baroque-Blue Mountain-Metal awaits you.

One more thing, if you do see him please tell me—what colour are his eyes? ❖



# LEAP YEAR

Illustration © 1995 by GAK



by KURT NEWTON  
by KURT NEWTON

Kurt Newton has two pieces in this issue, and we hope to see more of his work soon. Kurt, who lives in Connecticut, is a very active writer with works appearing or about to appear in *Pirate Writings*, *Terminal Fright*, *Not One of Us*, *Stygian Articles*, *Rictus* and *Dead Lines*.

**Once every four years the time winds blew across the planet** and carried each of us to another place in time.

It was something that was hard getting used to, when you were young. Moving all the time, it seemed. You would just get to know a certain place, a group of friends, then the leap year would come. Quick, disorienting, slingshot ahead. Or behind. Like passing through a cloud, to start again, somewhere new.

We adapted the best we could, in ways that were necessary. Children weren't conceived until just before the Leap, providing the maximum number of years before a child was on his or her own. Birthdays became precious things. Fathers who were never seen became idolized. Mothers were always remembered for their tear-stained faces, holding on until the very last moment.

This was how it used to be. Now they say the winds have died. Change no longer the custom.

It's going to be hard getting used to, especially for the young. Now their friends will always be there growing old before their eyes. Birthdays will become routine, sometimes even forgotten. Most will know their fathers and realize they are only human. And mothers will be pushed away for holding on too long.

But we'll adapt the best we can. In ways that are necessary. For we are a flexible people. Sad... but flexible.

# STORM MOTHER

by JOHN GREY

it amazes me still  
how you caress the storm  
as if it were a child,  
rocking the lightning  
in your folded arms,  
kissing the thunder  
on the cheek,  
patting the rain  
on its squally back  
as if that rogue torrent  
could burp its stomach clean

like the dark side  
of the self, you say,  
you must keep an open mind,  
cherish even the worst of us,  
give it room to breathe,  
to grow

the gray sky breaks,  
the wind subsides,  
a sheepish sun peeks through

you whisper in my ear  
what you would do  
to everyone if given half the chance

but you can kiss with  
the best of them,  
make love with the passion  
of evolving stars,  
and so what if the child  
is not what we would wish,  
these terrors that drive  
me under the bed,  
that suck on your breast



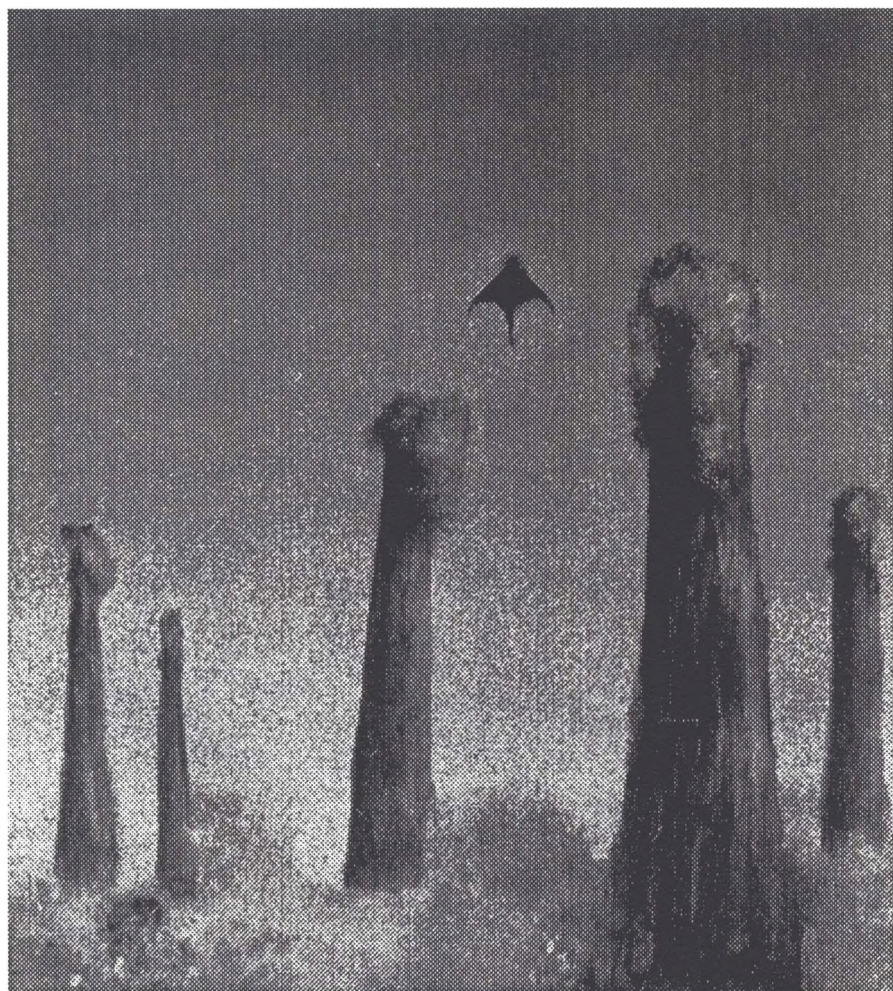


Illustration © 1995 by Kenneth W. McCool

#### A FEW ARTIST MINI-BIOS

Kenneth McCool is an artist living in rural Virginia. The above piece is called "Dresop Above Tor" and has a totally different effect in colour.

Cathy Buburuz is from Regina, Saskatchewan and once edited a classy magazine called *Champagne Horror*.

Pennsylvania artist GAK works for Tower Records and counts Dr. Seuss and Big Daddy Roth among his influences.





Illustration © 1995 by GAK

# LOST IN THE MAIL

by **ROBERT J. SAWYER**

We're delighted to present a new story by the popular and versatile novelist Robert J. Sawyer. Though this one's a tale of twisted possibilities and strange sacrifice (intrigued, aren't you?), you'll still catch a little whiff of dinosaur. Those who have followed Rob's Quintaglio series will enjoy the chance to see what he can do with protagonists of the human persuasion. Haven't we all waited by the mailbox, hoping that something wonderful will arrive? Something that just might change our lives?

## **The intercom buzzer sounded like a cardiac defibrillator**

giving a jump-start to a dying man. I sprang from my chair, not even pausing to save the article I was working on, threw back the dead-bolt, and hurried into the corridor. My apartment was next to the stairwell, so I swung through the fire door and bounded down the three flights to the lobby, through the inner glass door, and into the building's entry chamber.

The Pope was digging through his bag. Of course, he wasn't really the Pope — he probably wasn't even Catholic — but he bore a definite resemblance to John Paul II. The underarms of his pale blue Canada Post shirt were soaked and he was wearing those dark uniform shorts that made him look like an English schoolboy. We exchanged greetings; he spoke in an obscure European accent.

A hole in the panel above the mailboxes puckered like an infected wound. John Paul inserted a brass key into it. The panel flopped forward the way a pull-down bed does, giving him access to a row of little cubicles. He began stuffing the day's round of junk mail into these — a bed of fertilizer for the first-class goodies. He left my mailbox empty, though, and instead dealt out a full set of leaflets and sale flyers onto the counter that jutted from the wall.

For most people the real mail amounted to one or two pieces, but I got a lot more than that — including a copy of the Ryerson Rambler, the alumni magazine from Ryerson Polytechnic University. When he was finished, the Pope scooped up my pile and handed it to me. As usual, it was too much to fit comfortably into the box. "Thanks," I said, and headed back into the lobby.

I'd promised myself that I'd always take the stairs up to the third floor — one of these days I'd lose that spare tire — but, well, the elevator was right there, its door invitingly open ...

Back in my apartment I sat in the angle of my L-shaped couch with my feet, as always, swung up on the right-hand section. The mail contained the usual round of press releases, several bills, and the Ryerson Rambler. The cover showed an alumnus dressed in African tribal gear. According to the caption on the contents page, some relative of his had abdicated as chief of a tribe in Ghana and he was off to take his place. Amazing how people's lives can change completely overnight.

I was surprised to find a second magazine stuck to the back of the Rambler. University of Toronto Alumni Magazine, it said. Down in the lower-right corner of its blue-and-white cover were three strips of adhesive partially covered with a frayed paper residue. Its address label must have torn off and the glue had stuck onto the back of my magazine.

Intriguing: I'd been accepted by U of T after high school, but had decided to go to Ryerson instead. If I'd stayed with U of T, I'd be a paleontologist today, sifting through the remains of ancient life. Instead, I'm a freelance journalist specializing in the petrochemical industry, a contributing editor of Canadian Plastics, an entirely competent writer, and the only life I sift through is my own.

I began thumbing through the magazine. Here, in thirty-two glossy pages, was my past that could have been but wasn't: graduation ceremonies at Convocation Hall, an article about the 115th year of the campus paper, The Varsity; a calendar of events at Hart House ...

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I continued leafing through the magazine until I came to the final pages. There, under the heading "Alumni Reports," were photos of graduates and blurbs on their careers and personal triumphs. I was surprised to find a paleo grad — it was such a small program — but at the bottom of page 30 there was an entry about a man named Zalmon Bernstein. The picture was hokey: Bernstein, a toothy grin splitting his features, holding up a geologist's pick. He'd finished his Ph.D. in 1983, it said, the same year I would have likely finished mine had I gone there. Doubtless we would have known each other; we might even have been friends.

I read his blurb two or three times. Married. Now living in Drumheller, Alberta. Research Associate with the Royal Tyrrell Museum of Paleontology. Working summers on the continuing excavations in Dinosaur Provincial Park.

He'd done all right for himself. I felt a tinge of sadness, and put the magazine aside. The other mail was nothing urgent, so I ambled back to my computer and continued poking at my article on polystyrene purification.

The next day, John Paul greeted me with his usual "Morning, Mr. Coin." As always, I felt at a disadvantage since I didn't know his name. When he'd begun this route two years ago, I'd wanted to ask what it was. I fancied it would be a mysterious, foreign-sounding thing ending in a vowel. But I'd missed my opportunity and now it was much too late. Anyway, he knows far more about me than I could ever hope to know about him. Because my bank insists on spelling out my name in full, he knows that my middle initial — which I use in my byline — stands for Horton (yuck). He knows what credit cards I have. He knows I'm a journalist, assuming he'd recognize a press kit when he saw one. He knows I read *Playboy* and *Canadian Geographic* and *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*. He even knows who my doctor is. He could write my biography, all based on the things of mine he carries around in his heavy blue sack.

As usual, he was placing my mail in a separate pile. He topped it off with a thin white-and-orange book sealed in a polyethylene bag. I gathered my booty, wished him good day, and headed back. The elevator was only on two, so I called it down. I did that occasionally. If it was on three, I hardly ever waited for it and if it was on the top floor, well, once in a blue moon I might use it.

Someday I'm going to lose that spare tire.

As I rode up, I glanced at the white-and-orange book. It was a scholarly journal. My step-uncle, a university professor, had hundreds of such publications making neat rows of identical spines on the shelves of his musty den. This one looked interesting, though, at least to me: *The Journal of Vertebrate Paleontology*.

For some reason I swung my feet up to the left instead of the right on my L-couch. The Journal's table of contents was printed on its cover. I recognized some of the words in the titles from my old interest in dinosaurs. Ornithischian. Hadrosaurs. Cretaceous.

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I glanced at the piece of tractor-feed paper that had been slipped into the mailing bag: my name and address, all right. Who would have sent me such a thing? My birthday was rolling around — the big four-oh — so maybe somebody had got me a subscription as a semi-gag gift. The poly bag stretched as I yanked at it. Having written 750,000 words about plastics in my career, you'd think I'd be able to open those things easily.

Subscription rates were printed inside the journal's front cover. Eighty-five American dollars a year! I didn't have many friends and none of them would shell out that much on a gift for me, even if it was meant as a joke.

I closed the book and looked at the table of contents again. Dry stuff. Say, there's an article by that U of T guy, Zalmon Bernstein: *A New Specimen of Lambeosaurus lambei* from the Badlands of Alberta, Canada. I continued down the list of titles. *Correlations Between Crest Size and Shape of the Pre-Orbital Fenestra in Hadrosaurs*. "Pre-orbital fenestra." What a great-sounding phrase. All those lovely Latin and Greek polysyllables. Here's another one —

I stopped dead. *Scrobiculated Fontanelle Margins in Pachyrhinosaurus and Other Centrosaurinae* from the Chihuahuan Desert of Mexico, by J. H. Coin.

By me.

My head swam for a moment. I was used to seeing my byline in print. It's just that I usually remembered writing whatever it was attached to, that's all.

It must be somebody with the same name, of course. Hell, Coin wasn't that unusual. Besides, this guy was down in Mexico. I turned to the indicated page. There was the article, the writer's name, and his institutional affiliation: Research Associate, Department of Vertebrate Paleontology, Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Canada.

It came back in a deluge of memory. The ROM had undertaken a dig in Mexico a few summers ago. A local newspaper, *The Toronto Sun*, had sponsored it. I remembered it as much because of my dormant interest in dinosaurs as because it seemed so out-of-character for the tabloid *Sun* — best known for its bikini-clad *Sunshine Girls* — to foot the bill for a scientific expedition.

I was disoriented for several seconds. What was going on? Why did I even have a copy of this publication? Then it hit me. Of course. All so simple, really. There must be someone at the ROM with the same initials and last name as me. He (or she, maybe) had written this article. The *Journal* had somehow lost his address, so they'd looked him up in the phone book to send a contributor's copy. They'd gotten the wrong J. H. Coin, that's all.

I decided I'd better return the guy's *Journal* to him. Besides, this other Coin would probably get a kick out of the story of how his copy had ended up with me. I know I would.

I phoned the Royal Ontario Museum and spoke to a receptionist who had a pleasant Jamaican accent. "Hello," I said. "J. H. Coin, please."

"Can you tell me which department?" she asked.

He can't have made a big name for himself if the receptionist didn't know where he worked. "Paleontology."

"Vert or invert?"

For a second I didn't understand the question. "Oh — vertebrate."

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"I'll put you through to the departmental assistant." I often had to contact presidents of petrochemical firms for quotes, so I knew that how difficult it was to get hold of someone could be a sign of how important he or she was. But this shunting struck me as different. It wasn't that J. H. Coin had to be shielded from annoying calls. Rather, it was more like he was a fossil, lost in layers of sediment.

"Vert paleo," said a woman's voice.

"Hello. J. H. Coin, please."

There was a pause, as though the departmental assistant was momentarily confused. "Ah, just a second."

At first I thought that she, too, hadn't heard of J. H. Coin, but when the next person came on I knew that wasn't it. The voice seemed slightly alien to me: deeper, less resonant, more nasal than my own — at least than my own sounds to me. "Hello," he said, politely, but sounding somewhat surprised at being called at work. "Jacob Coin speaking."

Jacob and Coin. Sure, some names go together automatically, like John and Smith, or Tom and Sawyer or, if you believe the Colombian Coffee Growers' commercials, Juan and Valdez. But Jacob and Coin weren't a natural pair. I was named after my mother's father. Not some literary allusion, not some easy assonance, just a random line of circumstances.

I wanted to ask this Jacob Coin what his "H" stood for. I wanted to ask him what his mother's maiden name was. I wanted to know his birth date, his social insurance number, whether his left leg gave him trouble when it was about to rain, whether he was allergic to cheese, if he had managed to keep his weight under control. But I didn't have to. I already knew the answers.

I hung up the phone. I hated doing it only because I know how much I hate it when that happens to me — how much he must hate it, too.

I heeded John Paul's buzz again on Friday. This time, though, I didn't wait for him to assemble my pile of mail. Instead, I snapped up each envelope as he placed it on the counter. The first three really were for me: a cheque from one of my publishers, a birthday card from my insurance agent, and my cable-TV bill. But the fourth was bogus: a gray envelope addressed to J. H. Coin, Ph.D. The return address was Royal Ontario Museum Staff Association.

"Wait a minute," I said.

The Pontiff was busy dealing out lives into the little mailboxes. Hmm?"

"This one isn't for me."

"Oh, sorry." He reached out to take it. For a moment I thought about keeping it, holding on to that piece of what might have been, but, no, I let him have it.

He looked at it, then frowned. "You're J. H. Coin, ain't you?"

"Well, yes."

"Then it is for you." He proffered the envelope, but now that I'd let it go I couldn't bring myself to take it back.

"No. I mean, I'm not that J. H. Coin." The Pope said nothing. He just stood there holding the letter out towards me. I shook my head. "I don't have a

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Ph.D.”

“Take that up with whoever wrote you,” he said. I worry about apartment numbers and postal codes, not diplomas.”

“But I don’t want it. It’s not mine. I don’t work at the Museum.”

John Paul let out a heavy sigh. “Mr. Coin, it’s addressed correctly. It’s got sufficient postage. I have to deliver it to you.”

“Can’t you send it back?”

“I’ve been doing you a big favour all this time, calling you down instead of stuffing your things into that little box. Don’t make me sorry that I’ve been nice to you.” He looked me straight in the eye. “Take the letter.”

“But yesterday you brought me *The Journal of Vertebrate Paleontology*. And the day before, the *University of Toronto Alumni Magazine*. None of those things were meant for me.”

“Who’s to say what’s meant for any of us, Mr. Coin? All I know is I’ve got to deliver the mail. It’s my job.”

He went back to his bag. The next thing he pulled out happened to be for me, too. Sort of. Instead of placing it on the counter, he tried to hand it to me directly. It was a letter hand-addressed to Mr. and Mrs. Jake Coin.

I shook my head again, more in wonder than negation this time. “There is no Mrs. Coin.”

“You have to take it,” he said.

It was tempting, in a way. But no, she wasn’t my wife. She wasn’t part of my world. I didn’t move.

He shrugged and put the envelope in the empty cubicle that had my apartment number on it.

I didn’t want this other Coin’s life forced upon me. “Take that out of there,” I said.

John Paul continued distributing mail, ignoring me the way he might ignore a stranger who tried to strike up a conversation on the subway. I grabbed his arms and attempted to swing him around. The old guy was a lot stronger than he looked — thanks, I guess, to hauling that great sack of letters around. He pushed me away easily and I fell backward against the vestibule’s inner glass door. For a horrible instant I thought the pane was going to break and come tumbling down on me, but it held solid. The Pontiff had wheeled around and was now aiming a tiny aerosol can of Mace at me.

“Don’t even try that again,” he said in his mysterious European voice, not shouting, really, but with a firmness that made the words sound loud.

“Just tell me what’s going on,” I said. “Please.”

We held our eye contact for a moment. His expression wasn’t the indignation of a man who has suffered an unprovoked attack. Rather, it was more like the quiet turmoil of a father who’s had to spank his child. “I’m sorry,” he said.

Damn the man’s infinite patience. I was angry and I wanted him to be angry, too. “Look,” I said at last, “you keep bringing me the wrong mail.” I hated the quaver my voice had taken on. “I — I don’t want to have to report you to your supervisor.”

The threat seemed stupid and my words hung in the air between us.

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John Paul stared at me, his face waxing reflective. Finally, he laughed and shook his head. He hefted his bag, as if to gauge how much mail he had left to deliver. Then he glanced at his watch. "All right," he said at last. "After all, I don't want to get in trouble with the boss." He laughed again — not hard, really, but there were tears at the corners of his eyes.

I slowly brought myself to my feet, wiping dirt off the bum of my cutoffs. "Well?"

"You're out of place, Mr. Coin," he said, slowly. "You don't belong here." That's the story of my life, I thought. But I said, "What do you mean?"

"You think you can just up and say you're going to be a journalist?" He put the can of mace back in his bag.

"I didn't just up and say it. I worked hard to get my degree."

"That's not what I meant. You were supposed to be a —" he paused, then pronounced his next word carefully — "paleontologist."

"What do you mean, 'supposed to be'?"

"You can't just do whatever you want in this life. You've got to play the hand that's dealt to you. You think I wanted to be a letter carrier? It's just the way it worked out for me. You don't get any choice." His voice sounded far away and sad. "Still, it ain't so bad for me. I get to do this extra stuff as a sideline — putting people like you back on the right course."

"The right course?" The old guy was insane. I should run, get away, hide.

"When did you decide to become a journalist instead of a ...paleontologist?"

"I don't remember for sure," I said. "Sometime during my last year in high school. I got bored; didn't want to spend the rest of my life being a student."

"That was a big decision," he said. "I'd think you'd remember it more clearly." The Pope smiled. "It was April 22nd, 1973, at 10:27 in the evening. That's when the universe split. You ripped up your acceptance letter from U of T —"

"The universe did what?"

"It split, became two universes. That happens once in a while. See, they used to think that every time somebody made a decision, instead of things going one way or the other, they went both ways. The universe splitting a million times a second, each one going on forever along its separate path."

I didn't understand what he was talking about. "Parallel universes?" I said, the phrase coming to me out of dimly remembered Star Trek reruns. "I guess that's possible ..."

"It's hogwash, man. Couldn't happen that way. Ain't enough matter to constantly be spinning off new universes at that rate. Any fool can see that. No, most of the times the decisions iron themselves out within a few minutes or days — everything is exactly the same as if the decision had never been taken. The two universes join up, matter is conserved, the structure is sound, and I get to knock off early."

Although he sounded cavalier, he didn't look it. Of course, maybe he was always like this. After all, in the twenty-odd months that I'd known the Pope we'd never exchanged more than a dozen words at a time. "So?" I said at last.

John Paul stared at me, his face waxing reflective. Finally, he laughed and shook his head. He hefted his bag, as if to gauge how much mail he had left to deliver. Then he glanced at his watch. "All right," he said at last. "After all, I don't want to get in trouble with the boss." He laughed again — not hard, really, but there were tears at the corners of his eyes.

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“So, every now and then there’s a kind of cosmic hiccup. The universes get so out of joint that they just keep moving farther apart. Can’t have that. It weakens the fabric of existence, so they tell me. We’ve got to get things back on course.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You ever hear of Ronald Reagan?”

“No. Wait — you mean the actor? Guy who did a bunch of pictures with a chimp?”

“That’s him. There was a hiccup almost forty years ago. He got it into his head to be a politician, don’t you know. I won’t even tell you how high up he made it in the American government — you’d never believe me. It took an army of posties to get the world back on track after that one.”

“So you’re saying I’m supposed to be a paleontologist, not a plastics writer.”

“Uh huh.”

“Why?”

“That’s just the way it was meant to be, that’s all.”

My head was spinning. None of this made sense. “But I don’t want to be a paleontologist. I’m happy as a journalist.” That wasn’t really true, and I had a feeling John Paul knew it wasn’t, but he let it pass.

“I’m sorry,” he said for the second time.

This was craziness. But he sounded so serious, so much like he really believed it himself, that it made me nervous. “But other people get to choose their lives,” I said at last.

“No,” he said, looking very old. “No, they don’t. They think they choose them, but they don’t.”

“So — so I’m supposed to do some great thing as a paleontologist? Something that makes a difference in the scheme of things?” That wouldn’t be so bad, I thought. To make a difference, to count, maybe to be remembered after I’m dead.

“Perhaps,” said the Pope, but I knew in an instant that he was lying.

“Well, it’s too late for me to go back to school now, anyway,” I said, folding my arms across my chest. “I mean, I’d practically be ready to retire by the time I could get a Ph.D. in paleontology.”

“You’ve got a Ph.D. Don’t ask me what your thesis was on, though. I can’t pronounce most of the words in its title.”

“No. I’ve got a Bachelor of Applied Arts from the School of Journalism, Ryerson Polytechnic University.” I hadn’t said that with such pride in years.

“Yes. That, too.” He glanced at his watch again. “For the time being.”

I didn’t believe a word of it but I decided to humour the old man. “Well, how’s this change supposed to take place?”

“The two universes are mingling even now. We’re just suturing up the rift between them. When the posties have everything in place, they’ll automatically rejoin into one universe.”

“How long until that happens?”

“Soon. Today, maybe, if I finish my route on time.”

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"And I don't get a say in any of this?"

"No. I'm sorry." He sounded like he really meant it. "None of us gets a say. Now, excuse me, but I really must get on with my work." And with that, the Bishop of Rome scurried out the glass door.

Lubomir Dudek, member of the Toronto Local of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers, came to the last house on his route, a large side-split with a two-car garage. He didn't want to finish, didn't want to drop off a copy of the Jesuit journal *Compass* for a man who was now, because of that fateful day in 1966, one of Toronto's better-known podiatrists instead of a Father in the Society of Jesus. Lubo envied the foot doctor, just as he envied Jacob Coin, writer-about-to-turn-fossil-hunter. They went on from this point, with new vistas ahead of them. Their alternative lives beat the hell out of his own.

Lubo had known that the two realities would have to be reconciled. He, too, had made a fateful decision two decades ago, back when he was a press operator in a printing plant, a time when his own hiccups had drowned out those of the universe. He'd been pissed to the gills, celebrating — for the life of him he couldn't remember what. Wisely, or so it had seemed at the time, he had decided to call a cab instead of driving home from the Jolly Miller. It should have been the right choice, he thought sadly, but we play the hand that we're dealt.

For a long time he had wondered why he had been selected to be one of those helping to set things right. He'd tried to convince himself that it was because he was an honest man (which he was), a good man (which was also true), a man with a sense of duty (that, too). He'd waited patiently for his own letter carrier to bring him some exotic mail: a copy of a trade magazine from some new profession, maybe, or a dues notice from some union he didn't belong to, or even a dividend check from a stock he didn't own. But nothing of the kind came and finally Lubo was forced to consciously face what he supposed he had really known all along. His one brief moment of free will had let him live when he should have not. In the reunited universe, Jacob Coin would have his thunder lizards, the podiatrist would have his brethren, but Lubo would have only rest.

He came to the end of the driveway and lifted the lid of the foot doctor's mailbox, its black metal painfully hot in the summer sun. Slowly, sadly, he dropped in the sale flyers, bills, and letters. He hesitated for a moment before depositing the copy of *Compass*, then, with a concern not usually lavished on the mails, he gingerly inserted the slim magazine, taking care not to dog-ear its glossy white pages. ❖

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# NOT JUST A 'DINOSAUR GUY'

by Mici Gold

**"I never meant for there to be four dinosaur books,"** science fiction author Robert J. Sawyer confesses. He'd originally written just two, *Far-Seer* (Berkley/Ace 1992) and *End of an Era* (Ace 1994), both very different but both with dinosaurs as the subject, but his agent urged him to rewrite the ending of *Far-Seer*. "He said, 'Series are really hot in science fiction, and I can get a lot more money for this if we present it as the first book of a series.'"

At first Sawyer resisted. "I hate series... but I wanted to buy a house," he admits with a laugh. "So art and commerce had to meet somewhere in the middle." Thus his second dinosaur novel became the first book in the Quintaglio trilogy. "I do love dinosaurs, but I thought I had gotten them out of my system back in 1991 when I handed those two finished books in to my agent... I'm not disappointed that I spent all that time on dinosaurs, but on the other hand, I got this reputation as 'the dinosaur guy.' And it wasn't a great career move, necessarily. The dinosaurs are extinct, after all; there's not a lot of new material to be playing around with."

In fact, Sawyer's first novel, *Golden Fleece* (Warner 1990), had nary a dinosaur in it, but because of poor distribution and publicity, not many readers are aware of the book. Actually, *Golden Fleece* has something in common with his most recent novel, *The Terminal Experiment*, just released by HarperPrism: They both involve an interaction between human beings and artificial intelligence.

The human issue in *The Terminal Experiment* is infidelity in a marriage, which is complicated by a concept that Sawyer borrowed from *Golden Fleece*. "I took the idea of making simulations of the way the human mind works and having them be modified slightly by virtue of being in the computer and having that result in an unpredictable outcome." The deadly results go far beyond what any of the human characters can imagine.

"I really loved writing about humans," Sawyer recalls. "I thought I had done a really good job with the humans in *Golden Fleece*. But to get away from them for three books... and then in *End of an Era*, I was writing about a guy who was semi-bonkers..." He wanted to write about something that had hair on it, and he wanted to write a novel that was "intimate and character-driven... I wanted to do something very much where people could say, 'Yeah, that rings true' or 'No, that doesn't ring true,' based on their own personal experience with love and loss and so forth."

Sawyer continues this human orientation in his current project, tentatively entitled *Frameshift*. "I was casting around for another human-centred thing to do, and when I started reading about the Human Genome Project, I said, 'This is it; this is exactly the thing to write about...' We're right now at this moment in history actually defining biochemically what it means to be human." He has finished the first draft of the novel and will soon be looking for a publisher. Until it appears, readers can look for *Starplex*, a far future space adventure published by Ace, scheduled to appear in 1996.

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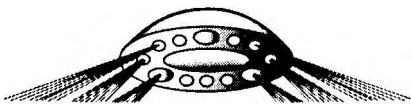
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Sawyer admits that his story in this issue of *Transversions*, "Lost in the Mail," is somewhat auto-biographical, in that it represents something of what his life might have been if he hadn't made the determined decision to leave non-fiction and begin writing the science fiction he'd always wanted to write. "The character in the story is a lot more melancholy than I am as a person, partly because he ended up not doing the thing he wanted to do... Any regrets there are in the story are regrets that I personally avoided having because I did decide, 'No, I'm not going to let circumstance and happenstance dictate the rest of my life. I'm going to take the bull by the horns and become an sf writer.'"

Sawyer feels that because the main character doesn't do that, it is a very Canadian story; beyond the fact that, like much of his work, it has a Canadian setting and institutions. "We are not entrepreneurial in Canada; we don't tend to go out and make our own fortunes. We love our safety net and we look forward to whatever is going to fall into that net for us. That's a lot of what underpins the story."

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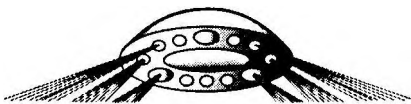


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# EXCHANGE

by NANCY BENNETT

There is time, always time lying along the serrated edge which gilded feet cross  
sudden darkness, one can only sense the blood in the distance.

We look to the stars, the glitter course where men have taken dreams  
and evolved them into nightmares...

There is a tear, a springing motion and it rips a reddened path to  
earth. Vacant black eyes stare from the window. Anger at our indislosure..

In the strip mine, we stand back from the alien burial pit where we discarded  
their silver relations, left them to rot, to be forgotten..

Just like in 'Nam, they were all supposed to be returned, it's what we told  
the black-eyed brotherhood in the silver discs.

But they held back too...

While the mother ships lift off with the old soldiers' remains inside they  
leave in the dust skeletal remains of the first experiment -

Cro magnon skulls crushed by the alien inquisitors, prehistoric  
artifacts of contact one..

Wondering how many more they have? Wondering how many more we've  
hidden?

Tying ribbons around metal trees, we enter into negotiations again;  
this time, maybe, we'll tell the truth..

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## IN THE MINE

by Niall McGrath

Always the stifling clutch of dust  
in nostrils, throat, around the tongue,  
as if each particle of oxygen  
were hot ash or cinder sucked in.

Always the throb and clatter  
of the machinery cutting,  
scratching along the coalface,  
rattling its heavy metal way.

Black heat, black dust, black sweat;  
each step through coal scree is a toil,  
aching the muscles, flagging the soul,  
clogging your concentration.

If your thoughts drifted for a second  
to the possibility of collapse,  
to the cramped confinement,  
you'd beat about you panicked.

An hour and a half to the surface  
through narrow passages by foot and wagon,  
up slopes flat on fast elevator belts,  
still through warmth, dust and darkness.

The only things you can trust -  
not roof, support, tool, train, belt, lift -  
Are the white shining, soot-lined eyes  
of black dust-spotted bodies around you.

**Niall McGrath lives in Ireland and has had poetry and short fiction published widely in Ireland, the UK and North America. His novel *Heart of a Heartless World* (Minerva Press, London) will be published this summer, and is about a rural lad's crisis of faith.**

## IN THE MINE

by Niall McGrath

Always the stifling clutch of dust  
in nostrils, throat, around the tongue,  
as if each particle of oxygen  
were hot ash or cinder sucked in.

Always the throb and clatter  
of the machinery cutting,  
scratching along the coalface,  
rattling its heavy metal way.

Black heat, black dust, black sweat;  
each step through coal scree is a toil,  
aching the muscles, flagging the soul,  
clogging your concentration.

If your thoughts drifted for a second  
to the possibility of collapse,  
to the cramped confinement,  
you'd beat about you panicked.

An hour and a half to the surface  
through narrow passages by foot and wagon,  
up slopes flat on fast elevator belts,  
still through warmth, dust and darkness.

The only things you can trust -  
not roof, support, tool, train, belt, lift -  
Are the white shining, soot-lined eyes  
of black dust-spotted bodies around you.

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# FUDAGEN'S FATE

by **STEPHEN CRANE DAVIDSON**

Stephen Crane Davidson lives in Atlanta. He has published in *MZB's Fantasy Magazine*, *The Stake* and is soon to be published in the *Worthy Foes* anthology by Obelesk Press. In addition to short stories, he is currently working on a sword and sorcery novel.

Eugene Fudagen looked ugly as a spacer whose suit just ripped. He had a massive body and a broad face but only tiny features. Worse, those beady eyes, the bulbous nose and the small mouth had all scrunched up in the middle. Eugene Fudagen was dead stop cold ugly.

He first came to see me three years ago. I admit it took a minute for me to take his card and head up to the room. But I did. I mean, close your eyes and they're all the same anyway, so why not? And he wasn't bad—in fact, I'd call him gentle.

Maybe I grew to like him 'cause of that gentleness in his touch. After a while, I even learned his schedule. I'd block the weekend he came in and just stay with him. We'd go round town together and everybody'd make way. Not 'cause he was big. You could tell. One look at his face and they'd look and walk the other way. Good thing I didn't. Saved my life.

It all began a couple years after I first met Fudagen.

That night, he gave me one of these sheepish looks that on him looked awfully contorted and painful, and he said he'd been seeing these things in his tunnel. He owned a mine you see. Chose mining cause he'd be alone, not have people looking at him and looking away. Anyway, he said he'd been seeing these little sparks that would fly around down in his tunnel, little things, could almost see through them.

He asked me if I thought he'd gone mad.

I told him he'd have to be mad to be living off here on this god-forsaken mud hole of a planet with its low gravity and noxious fumes. He just shook his head and didn't say anything more about it. I let it go as miner dreams.

Six months later, I happened to think of it and asked him about the sparks. He gave me a strange look and said that the things were alive, and they'd learned to talk to him. I took extra good care of him that night, doing all the little touches I knew he liked and figurin' he'd been having a hard time. He didn't say anything more about the sparks.

Then he missed a time. I actually waited the whole weekend hoping he'd come. He didn't. I felt crossed between angry and afraid. Even Sunday night, I turned down another customer just to pace the floors. What could have happened?

Three months later, I found out.

He came by, picked me up and couldn't keep his mouth shut. The aliens were angry. They didn't mind us living on the planet 'cause we really didn't share the same space, them moving so fast and being mostly in another dimension. But

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they were pissed as hell that we were taking parts of their planet, pile driving it up into space and shipping it off to somewhere. And it's true. Mining was the planet's whole industry and the stuff was shot up in big sling shots and hauled off to somewhere, and now these aliens were pissed, and we had to stop. They didn't even mind the mining as long as we didn't sling the stuff off the planet.

Instead of coming to see me last time, Fudagen had sold his mine and used the money to go off to the capital and try to convince the leaders that we had to stop. They laughed.

He took his ugliness back to the 'sparks' and told them nobody believed him. They'd have to show themselves. They said it was hard work to slow down enough to be seen.

I just sat and listened to Fudagen, wantin' real hard to believe him. I couldn't help it though; I asked why these sparks chose him to talk to. He scratched at his head and told me he thought it was because he was always alone down there. Never hired any human help—just bots.

That night in Fudagen's hotel room we watched the holo news. Mass psychosis they called it, but it made me feel cold and scared. Hundreds of miners had seem sparks in their tunnels. The government announced they'd called in a computer psy program on shared tunnel hallucinations.

Fudagen cursed and ranted. Why wouldn't they believe him? That weekend, he kept me company and that was all. Paid me for nothing. Most of the time he cursed and mumbled.

Two weeks later he came by again. Said the sparks would show them this time and that he'd warned the authorities. This time they'd have to believe. He stayed in a good mood and we had a good time. I got one of the other women to cover my schedule. On Sunday, the holo news reported that the mass slinger had broken down. Wasn't supposed to break for a hundred years. Engineers scratched their bald heads on the holo, said they had the part and would have it working in a few weeks. My Fud started cursing again. "Can't you see," I remember him saying, "they got to stop. This is serious stuff. We all could die."

He said those exact words.

Fudagen started travelling, telling everybody they had to stop the exporting. Everybody laughed at him. The ones that didn't laugh threatened. I could see his ugliness made it easier for them to dislike him.

Finally, I saw him on holo one night. He said the aliens were going to start killing people if we didn't stop slinging the planet's minerals into the sky and that Hasat Town would be the first. He said the aliens didn't want to, but nobody would listen. After Fudagen went off, a government guy came on and said not to worry. . . I quit listening, though I noticed how handsome the government man looked, how fine he talked compared to my plain-speaker Fud.

That night Fudagen called me from Hasat and told me it wouldn't do any good. He was going to the capital, and if I had any sense I'd leave the planet. He wired me tickets out.

The next day it began. All five hundred people in Hasat died—malfunction in the town air supply.

The politicians had Fudagen arrested. They said there were no aliens,



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that Fudagen had sabotaged the air system. Everybody'd look at Fudagen and they believed. "Yeah, he did it," I heard my own friends saying when they didn't know nothing about it.

I watched as they executed him. I cried.

Then I took his tickets and boarded the next flight off that planet.

Wasn't a week or two later when the news came that all human contact with Fudagen's planet had ceased.

Later, investigators said that all the air supplies went foul at the same time and went bad in a way that couldn't be easily fixed. Equipment with ten fail-safes failed. The people who had been suited with oxygen at the time of the failures all died of heart attacks. Everybody died within a half-hour of each other.

The experts all nodded knowingly on the holo news. They'd find the cause. Nobody did.

The story made all the nets everywhere. They decided to abandon the planet, order it off limits. I could've told them what had happened and what to do, but who'd listen to a woman of pleasure, pretty or not? Who listened to ugly old Fudagen? And it's true, it wasn't just his ugliness: he told 'em something they didn't want to know, and if you're going to do that, you'd better be careful. Poor old Fudagen never knew what careful was. Nobody'd ever been careful of him.

I have a comfortable life now. Fudagen left me all his credits, but I still work—just the way I am.

I do have enough money to pick and choose and I choose all the ugly ones, the ones the other women groan to see.

I figure I owe; besides, you never know what they might tell you. ❖

## ULCER

by STEVE RASNIC TEM

Too long  
you've nurtured it,  
like a crystal  
of hot glass, burning  
through your denial  
through your stomach wall  
where the acid  
of your anxiety rushes  
to feed, the appetite  
of your tension so rabid  
suddenly there's a crater  
near the centre of you  
where what can't be said  
and what can't be done  
eat their exit.

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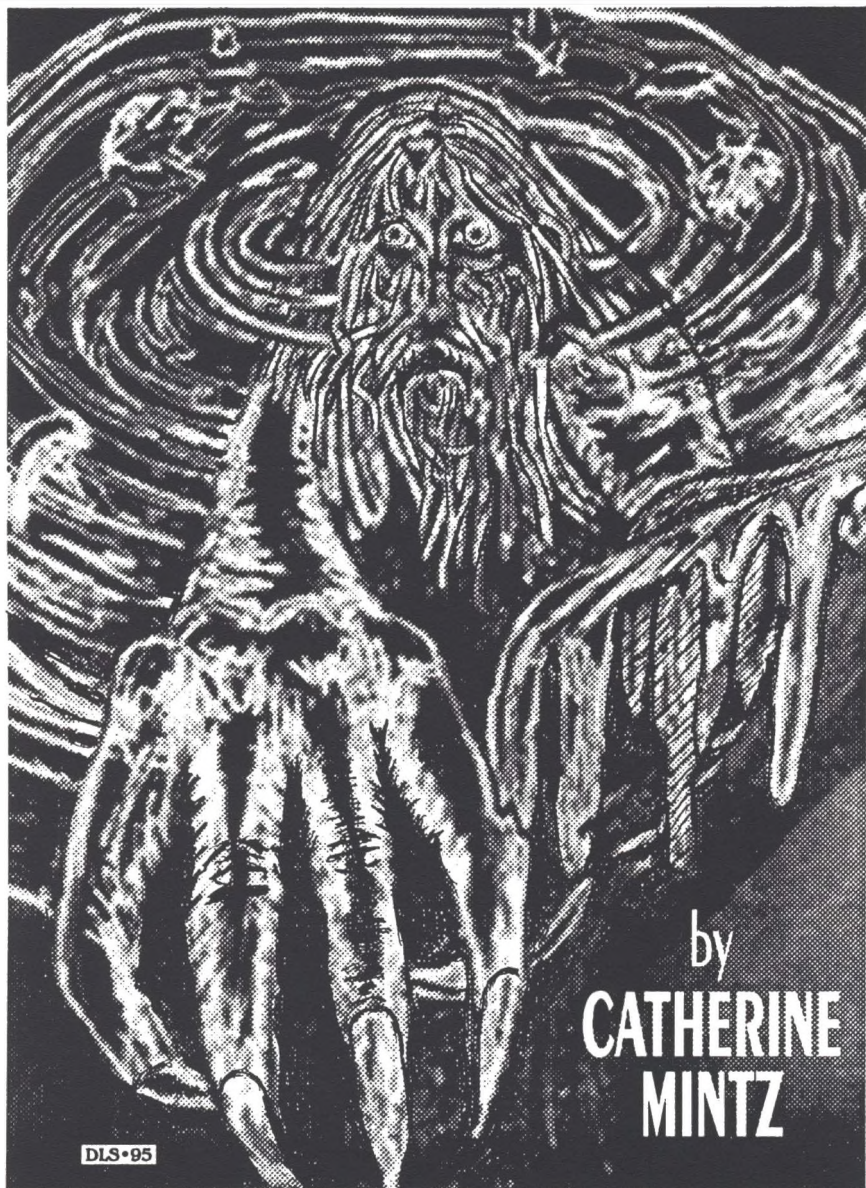
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eat their exit.

# THE WOMAN WHO KNEW BETTER

Illustration © 1995 by DL Sproule



by  
**CATHERINE  
MINTZ**

Catherine Mintz's articles, stories, poetry and interviews have appeared in such venues as *Science Fiction Chronicle*, *Starlog*, *Quantum*, *Asimov's* and *Science Fiction Eye*. Two of her poems graced *TransVersions* #2; this time we present the following shuddery and subtle pastorelle.

**Marilee banged the side of the old stove's firebox with a** stick of kindling to break up the ashes, then shook the grate back and forth until the uncovered bed of coals glowed red and even. She held a hand in the oven as her lips moved in silent counting, then whipped it out, and slammed the door to, hand muffled by the edge of her apron.

It'd be just about right by the time she needed it.

She reached up to the second dresser shelf, and took down the biggest mixing bowl, the one that looked as if its rim had been dipped in thick buttermilk that had run, here and there, onto its sky blue belly.

Old Elijah Krober that was Dulcy's father—a good potter with a bad tongue in his head—had made it more than thirty years ago, before his kiln had burned to the ground and he and his family had been killed. But the bowl was just as good as the day it was made. Better, maybe, for all its years of knowing batters and biscuits.

Marilee filled the sifter from the flour bin and brought it to the table, one hand under to save the floor. She shook four heaping handfuls into the bowl, then paused to tuck a loose strand of hair back into her tight grey bun.

Then she was out the open door, across the well-swept yard, down among the pine trees of Dulcy's grove, going to the spring where the butter crock sat nestled in the pebbled bottom, half hidden by the ripples. For convenience's sake the stoneware jar was secured by a string looped on an iron peg driven deep in the kneeling stone. Marilee knelt and pulled it out, automatically testing the water-logged cord with a jerk between both hands. Still sound.

One hand on cold pottery, she stayed a moment to look at the pattern of branches across the sky, to listen to the sound of water spilling over into the patch of ferns downhill, then her old knees protested the rock's smooth hardness just as her young ones had, and she rose quickly to her feet. Marilee had been kneeling there at least twice a day for sixty years and more.

She unfastened the crock from the string, made a tidy coil, knelt again to hang it on the peg, dipped her forefinger and drew a curlicue on the dry stone. Protection. Her great grandmother had done the same. Maybe her twice great gran, too. Slocum's was an old farm, with a date caved knuckle-deep in its thick, rough mantel. When they'd got the money for clapboards and the cabin was pulled down, the ancient chimney was left standing, and the new house built around it. The old place's well-seasoned logs had filled the fireplace the next winter.

But Dulcy's pool had been in use long before any log cabin had been here. There were arrowheads among the stones on the bottom, little ones, not much bigger than Marilee's thumbnail, black and thin, fluted along the edges where some ancient hand had knapped them. And before the worked stones had fallen in there had always been pebbles dancing in the boil, their fortune-telling patterns ignored by whatever came to drink.

Marilee looked and sniffed the air as she crossed the yard toward the weathered clapboard with its white-washed door. Cold weather was nearly here. The trees that climbed the hillsides all around had gone dull olive and rusty brown, battered by two seasons' worth of weather.



The late sunlight, brighter than gold, gilded each leaf of the maple at the gate. Its ragged crown shivered all over, once, despite the quiet air, then went completely still under Marilee's critical eye.

She frowned.

Slipping out from among the maple leaves were scraps of white, furling and unfurling, that might have been errant butterflies from the cabbage patch, if Marilee had planted cabbages this year. They drifted toward the ground, blew across the yard to linger above the doors of the old root cellar, then slipped around the corner of the house and were gone.

Marilee sniffed again, quite differently. Uppity, they were.

Inside, she put the crock on the corner of the table and untied the loop that held the wooden lid down. Cool water pooled on the tabletop, was sopped up with a fast swipe of the oldest dish towel. She scooped out a lump of butter, half the size of her fist, with a deft twist—almost the last, she'd have to walk to Lester's tomorrow and hope his cow was still in milk—then the old pastry cutter thumped its way across the bowl and back, fast as the hand could move, a blur to any watching eye.

It'd be biscuits, not cornbread, tonight. Fried ham. Greens that had been slowly simmering all the long afternoon. The tomato preserves Mrs. Willis had brought in trade. Haw jelly.

Marilee took pride in setting a good table.

She rolled the biscuits out, cut them with a floured water glass, lifted them onto the black baking sheet with a spatula, moving faster now, with an eye on the sky out the window that had somehow changed from afternoon to evening when she wasn't looking.

Down to the spring with crock and bucket, back with the bucketful of water for the first washing up, scrubbing the table, rinsing the bowl, setting the iron kettle on the back of the stovetop to heat for the real washing, after.

Quick, with a flick of her wrists, she shook the red-checked tablecloth open in the air and settled it in place. Then the wooden fork and spoon. The wooden-handled knife. The water glass with a stencilled white and green design of orange blossoms. The napkin in its deal ring of four hands clasped together, the last of the set her old uncle had carved for herself and her three sisters.

Marilee surveyed it all and pursed her lips with satisfaction.

A rainbird fluttered, frantic, against the lower panes of the window, and she took off her apron, leaned through the open door to shoo it away. She squinted up at the darkening sky. The lavender clouds were big-bellied with threats. Showers later, she thought.

Above the maple a cloudlet making its way against the wind caught her eye and stopped, drifting off unconcernedly, almost invisible against its bigger brothers billowing high in the air, their immense heights stained peach and rose with sunset.

Marilee sniffed once more, folding her apron crosswise then longwise into a tight, smooth bundle, and draping it over one shoulder. Uppity. But it was about time anyway, dark was coming on—already the tree shadows stretched long arms across the yard and the sun was down behind the hills.

She went over to the wooden, slanting doors of the old root cellar, drew the oak peg from the rusty hasp, and used it to rap on the planks. "Sonnyboy? You can come out now. Your things have been looking for you." She swung the hasp back on one side and stuck the peg into the loop on the other.

One panel rose slowly up, releasing the scent of fresh- turned earth and rotting leaves. Something darker than the cellar's darkness growled and scabbled at the iron door fastenings.

Marilee pulled the apron off her shoulder and fanned herself with the folded bundle. "Mind, don't hurt yourself. Sometimes I wonder if you have good sense." She looked into the gloom. "Come on up, now. Supper's ready."

There was a great whiff of dank air, and Sonnyboy's shaggy head peered out from the safe darkness. He mewed at the fading purple of the clouds.

"It's past sunset," said Marilee firmly. "Showers or no, your father'll be waiting by Crowther's farm at full dark."

Sonnyboy slobbered a little, and mounted another stair.

Marilee fanned herself a bit more and went on, "You'd think Japhet Crowther would have learned by now. I've lost count how many cows he's had pulled down." She eyed the massive, hesitating form. "He brought new hens last Tuesday. Tell your daddy to look for eggs—no use your trying to gather them..."

The huge, taloned hands worked helplessly.

"Shame on you for being shamed," she said tartly. "You know how your father depends on you."

Wooden planks thudded, and dust pattered down. Sonnyboy rose out of the earth, step by step.

"It'll be nice after midnight," Marilee said, turning away to give him a moment's privacy while his eyes adapted. His eyes did tear so when he looked into the light. "This breeze'll blow the clouds right through."

Sonnyboy huffed, and smelled the rising wind. In the dusk he was an enormous blackness pestered by a swirl of tiny glowworms hard to make out even in the shadows beneath the trees.

Half-formed intentions, no doubt. Marilee knew better than to pay any mind. His daddy'd find work for his idle hands.

Thinking of Sonnyboy's father, she bowed her head in silent homage. Japhet Crowther was foolish not to pay his respects. Everyone hereabouts did, just like their families always had. It did no harm to be respectful.

The Old Powers could surely be touchy if you weren't. Only a fool would set himself up to go against them. Elijah Krober had been just such a one. Dulcy'd been the only one to escape when the kiln went.

Marilee remembered the girl, barefoot in her white night shift, standing right there under the maple, face dyed red by the light of a fire a good half mile away. "He didn't mean it," she kept wailing. "He didn't!"

Hysterical, the sheriff from Bixby said, and the locals had muttered something like agreement. Someone hunted up an old blanket for the girl and someone else brought sweet tea in a cracked cup. The three county officers stood about, swag bellies hanging over their belts, fussing over Dulcy until the fire burned down. It was a drought year, and they'd only come to see that the hillside didn't

go, and a wildfire start on its way toward Bixby.

The wind just eddied around and around in Krober's hollow, building a pillar of flame that you could see for miles. The blaze died before dawn, leaving nothing but the burned-out kiln, the fireplace, and a few scorched trees.

A miracle, the sheriff said, in this dry weather.

Yes, indeed, everyone murmured. And it was.

Sonnyboy shuffled his feet and lifted his head to the growing dark. The first star winked on, then a second. Marilee's mouth went prim. The Powers were mostly forbearing if a man was drunk, sick, scared or ignorant. But Elijah...

None of them had been surprised when the girl was found in Slocum farm pool, her long hair floating like water weed. "Seen too much," said some of the old folks. "Made her bargain," other withered voices said. Marilee sniffed. As if they knew anything. Dulcy'd read the patterns in the stones at the bottom of the spring.

They'd buried the girl right there, under the pines—the blanket, the cup, and the body in the same old shift she'd died in. Death was a high price for a young girl to pay for her daddy's mouth, but Elijah'd known better than to say what he had. Respect was all the Powers demanded.

A course, if you offered more...

They could be neighbourly.

Marilee suddenly smiled into the darkness. Fresh eggs would taste mighty good, fried, with plenty of bacon. Sonnyboy liked bacon almost as much as he liked ham. Better, some days.

"Supper," she said briskly, and went ahead to slake the stove with ashes.

"Ahh," breathed her son, a hoarse wind deep in his chest.

Shussssh went the trees in Dulcy's grove. ❖

## THE COMING OF ANTS

by Ed BARANOSKY

'Go to the ant, thou sluggard: consider her ways, and be wise.'

- Proverbs, 6:6

The pale sun's slight  
Heat couldn't warm  
The slender threads of life;

The coffee clock's red  
Digital timer  
Pulsed migraine.

Or weaving a dream  
Of impossible hope,  
Melt the messenger's heart.

As the TV flickered on  
And announced Dali's death,  
The telephone book,

I opened the apartment  
Door's darkness  
Rising snowblind

Open on the floor,  
Surged with black ants  
Consuming numbers.

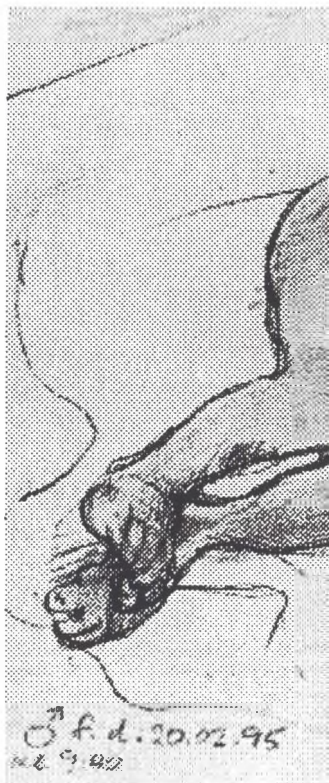


# THE WOMAN WHO DREW DEAD BABIES

By HEATHER SPEARS

**The woman who drew dead babies thought of herself in other terms.** Had sometimes to go out in the small hours of the night, that time “when fires break out and children are born.” Was like the illegal midwives in Canada who drove small cars through deserted streets and avoided the hospitals reeking of foreboding and harm. Was like a thief, intent on her own business and no one else’s. Was like a detective, or a fireman or anyone who was at the mercy of someone else’s timing. Could sometimes be put off but not for long. Was not happy when like an undertaker’s help she came too late and had to seem to reconstruct what was already in decay. Was dismayed when even as she drew, the small cheeks, or the skin over the narrow skull, loosened and drooped in folds like wet cloth. Was dismayed to see the large and perfect ones, and wondered (at first, curious, no longer) why they had not lived. Was used to standing in cold rooms among shiny equipment. Drew also living babies but was not remembered for that. Had once drawn a baby who died as she drew it, a faint bubble appearing between the lips. Was aware, as those who have watched through a hospital illness are aware, how naked and bereft the prepared dead look without their systems and intubations. Did not prettify, usually, except in the case of torn skin. Had been asked more than once to draw the eyes opened, eyes no mother had ever seen lifted towards her, opening. Endured the tears of parents, was embarrassed, took her money and left. No longer kept letters of gratitude. Had drawn from a black photo while the parents stood at her shoulders and told her what to put down, like a police artist. Had drawn with no photo at all, only their words, their stammered intact memory. Had also drawn a premature head and turned it upright, to resemble a school photo. But the woman who drew dead babies had seldom to accommodate, for the simple reason that parents loved the look of their own child, could love anything.

The woman who drew dead babies had another life that had nothing to do with it. In this life she took holidays, went shopping, felt ordinary. At home, even while drawing, she listened to talk shows on the radio. She often turned the picture (if it was a photograph) upside down or sideways, her own drawing as well. Finished, she stood and stretched, reheated coffee, bustled a little to put the drawing, under tissue paper (blue or pink), into its envelope. When she had cleared up she would go over to the window, open it,





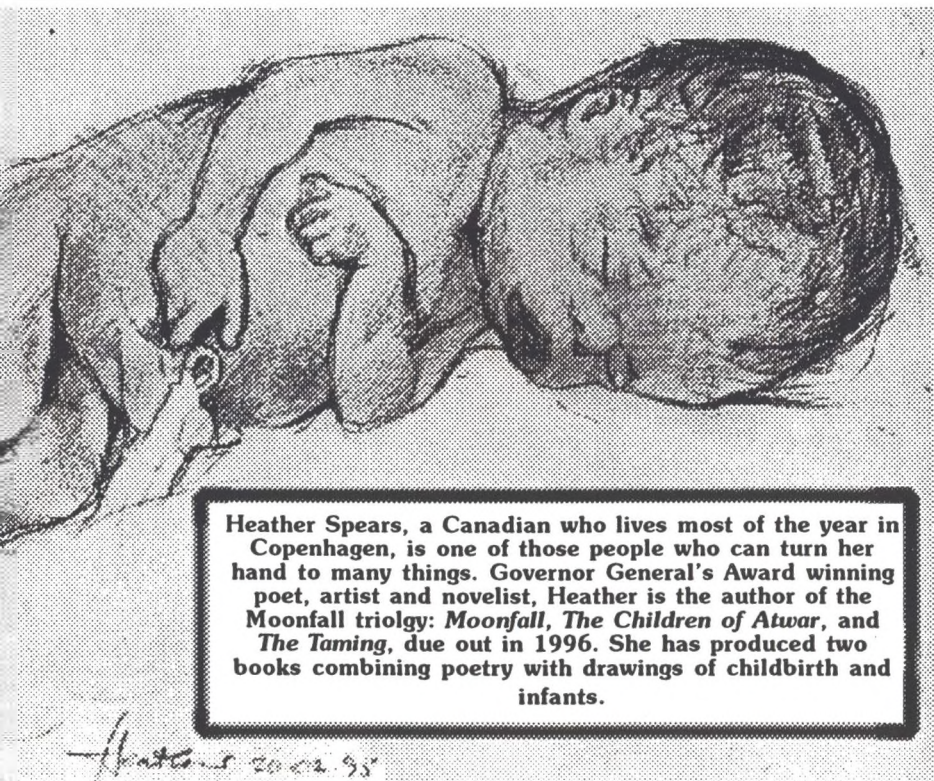
notice day or evening, sniff at traffic and grass. The woman who drew dead babies had once dreamed of becoming a real artist.

In the hospitals she was more vulnerable. The idea nowadays was to let the parents sit with the infant while it expired: the tubes were removed; often the baby, comforted by human warmth and no more invasions, clung on for hours. She had drawn babies while the tears of fathers fell across their faces. Heart-babies were always the most beautiful, with black hair and red cheeks. Unusually long eyelashes on the chronically sick - an extravagance, the body's helpless compensation.

The woman who drew dead babies sometimes had to take a while to acknowledge, in her heart, a kind of beauty in the child. Then, in spite of circumstances, she was able to continue.

The woman who drew dead babies was glad that she had never lost a baby herself. Therefore she could not understand and was not forced into trying. She saw that nothing was necessary except to perform the act, which was both compassionate and impartial. She allowed the act to take care of the sentiment "so there would be no residue." The woman who drew dead babies had once dreamed of becoming a real artist.

The woman who drew dead babies sometimes laughed, ate chocolate, and read polite mystery novels in bed, careful not to guess at the ending. ❖



**Heather Spears, a Canadian who lives most of the year in Copenhagen, is one of those people who can turn her hand to many things. Governor General's Award winning poet, artist and novelist, Heather is the author of the Moonfall trilogy: *Moonfall*, *The Children of Atwar*, and *The Taming*, due out in 1996. She has produced two books combining poetry with drawings of childbirth and infants.**

*Heather Spears 2002.95*



# INSECT DREAMS

KURT NEWTON

I went to pet an ant lion  
and fell down its funnel of sand.  
A garden spider rescued me  
and cradled me in its web.  
I listened to a cicada sing  
and slept for seventeen years.  
A darning needle pricked my skin  
and woke me from my sleep.

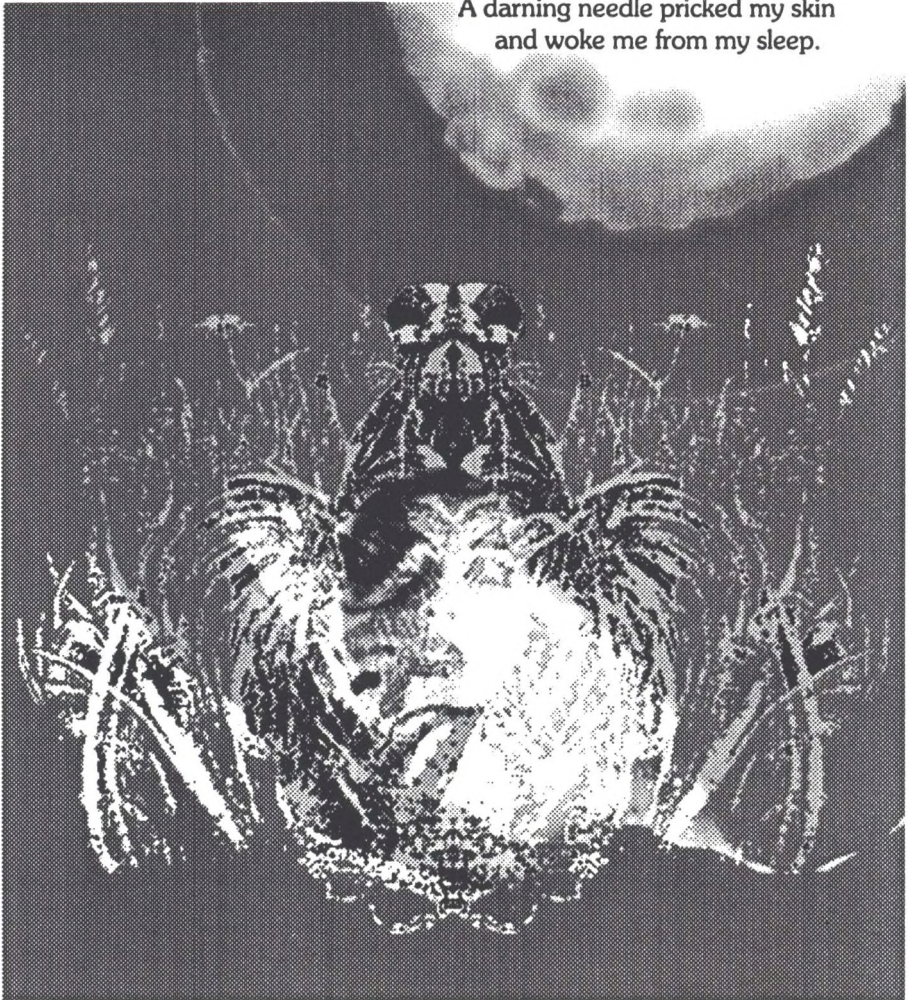


Illustration © 1995 by DLSproule

# THE INVOLUNTARY PHILOSOPHER

by UNCLE RIVER

Uncle River often writes us letters that are longer than this story. His address is sufficiently remote that it has neither street name nor box number. River has sold stories to *BBR*, *Interzone*, *Asimov's*, *Pirate Writings* and many others. He edits a mag entitled *XIZQUIL*. And his novel *Thunder Mountain*, speculative fiction set in the contemporary rural American Southwest, is due this fall from Mother Bird Books.

**Lonchin was neither man nor god and a little of both. Very** little, he thought, under the weight of unformed being.

Is this what growing old is about? Lonchin mused, more than a little appalled.

He examined the back of his left hand. Was that a liver spot... or merely a fleck of potato skin? Age was, he well knew, still less an excuse for the spirit he equally was. As for his mind, he'd misplaced that, intentionally he had to admit.

Senile. Lazy. Decrepit. He tried on various explanations. All fit, but too facile they fit, cheap garments that neither concealed nor enhanced the form they inadequately defined.

Now that's the problem, Lonchin thought. (He'd have been amused that he had an implement of the soul with which to think, had he the energy to be amused.) Form. The lack thereof.

Lonchin stepped out the door of his soul, aware only as he moved that he needed to take a leak. Must have been the coffee, he thought. He couldn't recall having drunk any coffee, but the fluid his body emitted so informed him by its odour. A convenient pinon tree concealed his bodily function from any otherwise offendable eyes.

Or were there any otherwise offendable eyes? His own focussed more slowly than they once had, for dark or distance, but they still focussed. As much could not be said for Lonchin's world. That, he knew, was the problem.

"Category please." Lonchin recalled the stern visage of an early teacher by the name of... or was that merely an elderly illusion, lodged insidiously in the arbitrary fibres of Lonchin's soul? He might have been frightened, but this would have taken more energy than he had.

The solar storm. It's short circuited everyone's brain. The planetary conjunction. The state of the world. Personal. ...the stern image of Category melted away as conclusively as his urine on the dry, porous ground.

What to do? What to do? Must one do anything? Lonchin wondered as he closed the aperture on the front of the article he took for granted covered his body just in time to dodge the leaden-winged lump the pinon tree turned into.

The lump floundered ineffectually past Lonchin and down the side of the hill, dragging its useless wings behind. It whined as it went. Lonchin felt distinct relief when it passed beyond his hearing. Then he felt as much relief to feel anything distinct.

Madness, Lonchin thought in an experimental manner, trying on the

appellation in hope it might adequately clothe the situation. Alas, the term proved no more effective at dispelling the oppressive weight than had senility or solar storm.

Lonchin contemplated his tenuous condition. It's a moral problem, he decided, or at least it includes a moral problem. Lonchin worried briefly that yet another form would slide back into the mental muck from which it had emerged, sucking yet a bit more of his depleted energy with it. To his relief, this one held: Anything one does has effect. There is a moral problem, whether anyone else cares or even notices or not.

Does the recognition of karma, then, induce paralysis? Lonchin considered. It might, but the present problem was simpler, if equally difficult. Lonchin felt not so much morally appalled by the prospect of consequence as plain exhausted.

Being not dead, one must be somewhere. Continuing to exist, one must do something. Or must one? Certainly: Breathe. Urinate. Contemplate the potential form of the Universe.

Now why on (Earth?)... Lonchin looked about him, dubious of the vague vicinity in which he performed his unclear meditation.

"Which way did they go?"

Lonchin looked up in surprise.

A small army trooped into his clearing in the void, intent, wary. A somewhat grubby young man with a gun directed his intentness to Lonchin.

"Oh, that way." Lonchin pointed into the woods.

The persons at war dashed off.

Or had they? Lonchin wondered, just as another, equally grubby small army charged into his clearing from another direction.

"Which way did they go?"

"That way." Lonchin pointed in another direction.

The second army tore off, not likely to encounter the first any place nearby.

At least Lonchin hoped not, though he recognized his own motivation only after the fact. Reaction had been entirely spontaneous.

Is action, then—any action—the progenitor of form?

Yes, Lonchin thought, that observation is also real, like the moral issue, and likewise incomplete. Action generates not only form, but energy with which to act on form, but only from preexistent potential, an abstraction whose most obvious concrete manifestation—or at least most immediate—is youth and unconsciousness.

I wonder what they were fighting about, Lonchin thought. Bath water. Perhaps there is a shortage of bath water.

Lonchin looked at the ground. With the pinon lump long gone, it was drier than ever.

A naked young woman appeared, shapely and smelling more female than human.

Oh, perhaps that's it, Lonchin thought. A young man, equally naked and vitally formed in a manner more male than human, affixed to the woman, by magnetic attraction no doubt.

Soon both were lost to view in a sea of squalling: "Food! Attention! Me!"

Lonchin began to gage on his own past and proclivities.

The profligates went elsewhere. Lonchin cleaned the sweat from his ears. The fact that action generates is an entropic circle. He flicked his sweat on the ground, where several species of purple, yellow and white flowers sprouted. The white ones attracted masses of honeybees which hummed about Lonchin's feet.

Doing leads neither to peace nor freedom, he thought, morosely. I'm thirsty. Perhaps I should have saved some sweat.

But no, amid the flowers, Lonchin's sweat had nourished a small tree, from which now depended half a dozen fragrant ripe peaches.

Lonchin plucked a peach and bit tentatively. The rich, sweet juice tasted far better than his sweat.

Lonchin unpacked the tent he had set down shortly before he misplaced his mind. Neither man nor god, he contemplated, with the eyes of both; forms he neither created nor controlled, and upon which his actions appeared to have effect both profound and unpredictable.

No more certain than before, Lonchin found he was less exhausted. It must have been the peach, he thought, nourishing as well as tasty. He might once have worried about which actions effectively cultivated peaches, but he was old enough to recall that worry disturbs the digestion.

A temporary solution, no doubt; still Lonchin felt appreciation. Would it do any harm, he wondered, to eat another peach? The honeybees hummed on.



## Toboggan Hills

by **NANCY BENNETT**

Sometimes, softly driven lines of snow, bending blue  
sunlight glances off the quartz eye, buried...open  
Snow shallow falls, clinging to the sleeping beast  
white covers white as fur frosts  
breath. Rotating round thick foggy patches drawing in  
and again, slowing with the multitude of flickering flakes  
bury the giant in hibernation, leaving only  
the large hill for children to play on...

But the blue of the ice bends in the shadows  
some say the hills look different, you can see them rising  
and falling without the wind and you shiver  
for you feel suddenly, blue eyes staring at you  
From the melting snow...



# MAL de OJO

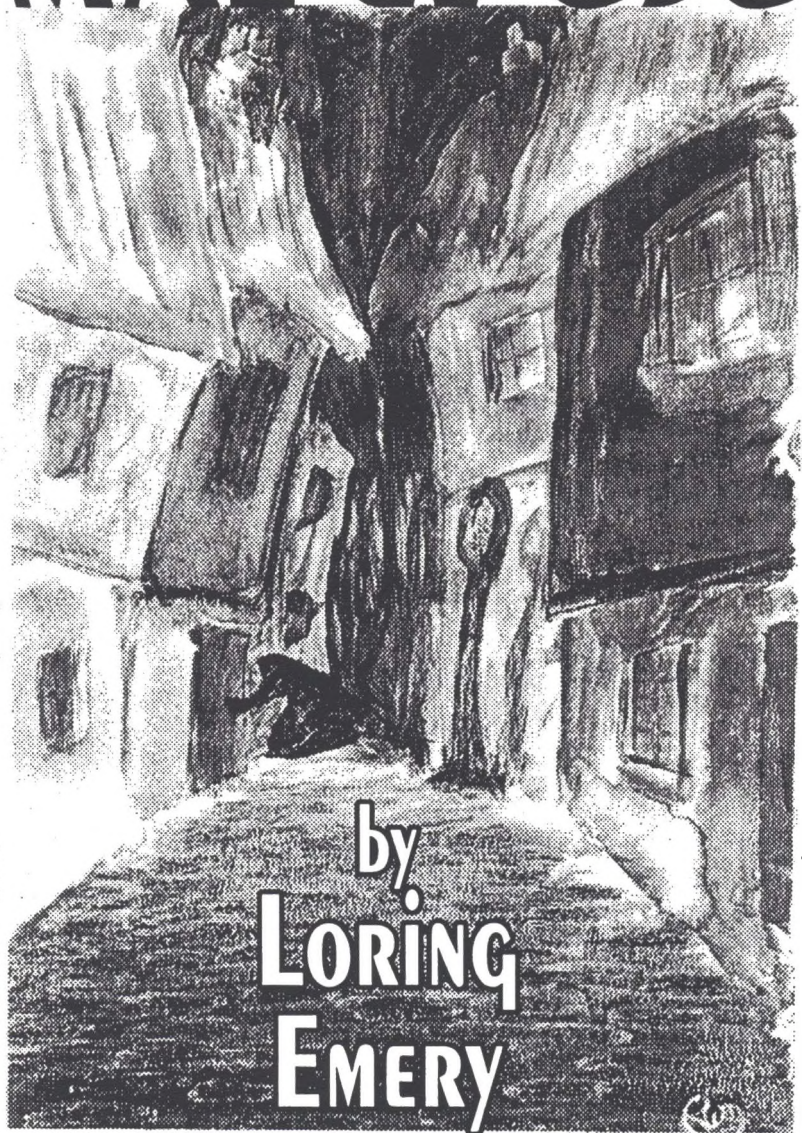


Illustration © 1995 by Kenneth W. McCool

by  
**LORING  
EMERY**

Loring Emery modestly pretends to be a good-humoured gent of some antiquity...this may well be so, but this is no ordinary waggy-tailed old sod. Loring, who lives in Pennsylvania, co-edits *FAYRDAW*, a suitably quirky & incisive zine of the speculative ilk, and has had many stories published in the large and small press. His recent collection, *Lucura Barata*, is available from Merrimack Books. The following piece examines just how far a soul can be bent before snapping.



**It was an old playing card, the knave, but someone had** stabbed the eyes out of the figure on the face and had written “luego” on the back with a broad black pencil. Soon. Chavela tried to tear the card into bits but after she tore it twice she couldn’t hold the pieces in her short, clumsy fingers any more. Dropping it into the trash in the gutter, she shuddered and hurried down the street.

How did they find me? Here in *Juarez*? I left them three years ago in Tuxtla Gutierrez...

Every stranger was a threat, now. The thousands of people here, her protection, were now the enemy. They could be anywhere.

Juanito was sweeping in front of his shop. He looked up at her approach and smiled, flashing gold. “*Dias, Srta. Marisco!*” He stopped to wipe his brow. “*Calliente...*”

“Si. Juanito...” She looked up and down the street. “Did you see any—strangers around here lately?”

He chuckled. “Si. Always there are lots of *turistas*.” He made a rueful face. “But they just look. Nobody buys...”

“No, no, not tourists. Mexican men. Suspicious...”

He shrugged. “If they come from away, they’re tourists.”

“Si. Gracias. I was—expecting some visitors. But I don’t want to see them.”

“So, send them away...”

“I can’t! I don’t even know what they look like! They—change...”

Juanito nodded somberly. “If I see these men you don’t know, I’ll tell them you’re not here.”

“Juanito...” She sighed. “Look, amigo, I’m in trouble. Long ago...”

She started. *There! Across the street, at Oppenheim’s!* She slipped back into the dark of Juanito’s shop and looked out between the bars of the *contraventana*.

There they were, three men, dressed in the dark blue suits of businessmen everywhere, wearing the ubiquitous straw hats with the white bands. They pretended to look in the shop window, but Chavela knew they were using the reflection of the window to see across.

*Is it them?* She watched a while longer, caught as a bird is caught by the serpent’s eye. Yes, there’s the *moreno*, the brown man, the one they had brought from the islands.

Juanito put down his broom and started to crank up the heavy *contraventana*. He called to her. “Can I show you something, Srta. Marisco? Some fine new rings from New York?”

“No, no, thanks.” She held out her gloved hands. “I don’t wear rings. Juanito... Can I go out the back?”

He nodded and stopped winding open the shutter. “Srta. Marisco... Chavela...? Are those the *hombres*?”

She nodded and ducked through the curtains. “Si. Thanks, Juanito,” she called. “If they come in, you hold them for a while, okay?”

“No problema. *Suerte, amiga.*”

Chavela could peep out through the flowers against the kitchen wall before she went out into the yard. Praise the Mother for Juanito's famous jacaranda!

Nothing was stirring on Calle Mariscal. Across was a gate but it went into the *jardin* of a *licito bandito*. A rich lawyer, and he had dogs... *Not that way.*

*I can't go back to my place. They'll be waiting.* But where? Down the street was an old building that once was the Cafe Ali Baba. A bar, when the soldiers still came. She peered at the ruined wall with the staring, empty windows.

She swept the street again with fearful eyes, then darted across and slipped through one of the low windows. *This was a cafe? It looks like a sty....* She glanced with distaste at the sign over the little door under the stair. *Dispensario.* Every cafe had its dispensary back then. The Norte army insisted. Upstairs must be the *pesebres* where the girls took their clients.

Clients? There were still "clients" in Juarez, who came for divorces and lawsuits. Not the shiny-headed Norte soldiers with their slurring talk and their false *bravata*, like little *gallos* just out of the nest-box.

A great burning came over Chavela then. Her mother became one of these when papa died. *Putas*, they called them, but they were only schoolgirls playing at being women, here in the *pesebres* every night except the holy days. When her mother got sick they took Chavela to the school at Our Lady. *They say she died of TB, but I know. She did it herself.*

The stairs were full of trash, but that helped to dull the sound of her clumsy feet. She looked down the narrow hall. There were still sheets and shams piled on a shelf at the end. *Oho! Nobody stole these?* Probably afraid of the *peste*. Or the *obispo* put his ban on it.

Chavela pushed back the beaded cortina and looked into one of the cribs. Imagine having—passion in here, just inches away from the next!

She swept the trash off the bed and lay down to let her racing heart rest. *Well, good enough. Tonight in the dark I can get across the river and take a bus to Santa Fe. There I can hide in the mission a few days.*

She peeled off her gloves and painfully untied the ugly shoes. It didn't matter that they called her an *excentrico*, with her gloves even on the hottest days. Nothing mattered so long as they didn't know the truth.

Chavela woke to the thump of her heart. No, another thump, a foot-fall. Then another. *Somebody coming? If it's them...* She could never get past and down that narrow stair. The only window is above the sink across the hall. Probably barred...

It stopped. Then a few more bumps, in the crib next to hers. Finally she heard the squawk of the old bedspring as a heavy body was lowered onto on it.

*Who? Some bum, I guess, living here. But I didn't see any food or clothing. Maybe just the night. Why this night?*

When the visitor spoke Chavela thought she'd die of the shock and fear. "¿Alo? Who's there?"

She waited, her fist stuck in her mouth. The voice asked again. It was a soft, tired voice. "Are you *destituido* too?"

Chavela risked an answer. "Si. I must stay until the night. Then I am going. Okay, *amigo*?"

The voice was younger now. It held a tight irony. "Si. In the night. Always going in the night, Chavela?"

Chavela sat silently. The pleading, the begging, the praying did no good. They were going to do it, and she was to be the agent. Like in Guatemala, with the Canadian ambassador. Now it was *el presidente* himself!

If she didn't? If she resisted? She tried that, once. She thought she could endure to save the life of a stranger that she didn't hate. But the *moreno* made the mind-pain that no one could bear and when they made her do it a week later he hurt her again.

Now the little TV in the car showed the motorcade coming around the wide turn onto Paseo de la Reforma. Soon...

The brown man gripped her arm. "¿Preparado?"

She nodded. "Si."

He pointed. "There! The second car. Now, Chavela!"

She stared at the car. The president would be on her side, and all she had to do is concentrate on him and make the *maledición del ojo*. The evil eye. That people still believed in such nonsense... But she, Chavela, she had the touch. They knew after her drunken father burned her with his cigarette...

*Back to now, Chavela. You must finish!* She stared fiercely at the limousine window, trying not to blink. "Is it done?"

The brown man shook his head. "No. If he falls, they will speed up and take him away. More! Give him *more!*"

She bit her lip. "It is all I have!"

He sighed. "Then you know what is needed?"

"Si." She hung her head and held out her hand. Quickly the brown man put the vise on her fingertip and twisted the screw. She stifled a cry and turned her attention back to the limousine. Until she succeeded the pain would not leave.

The car still moved slowly through the crowds. She needed more power. "More, *demonio!* Tighter!"

Now her whole world was focused in that crushed and screaming finger. The pain was something beside her, now, a being of its own. It had sound and light and smell and taste. But still the big car rolled majestically by.

"Tighter! He's passing!" She pushed the brown man's hand away and twisted the screw herself.

Blood sprayed out of her split fingertip and all the power of that inexpressible pain went out through her soft brown eyes. Finally, blessedly, the big black car veered out of line, nearly running down the foot-guards as it wove its way out of the crowds and off to the hospital. But there was no need to hurry...

Chavela slumped back, exhausted, near fainting from the agony. The brown man took off the cruel clamp and thrust her hand into the bucket of cold water. In a moment he had the needle in her finger and the blessed Novocaine started to push back the pain. It would be back later, as in all the others. A guest that never really left any more.

The brown man was pleased. “*Bueno*. Now you can rest, eh, Chavela?”

When the bus door opened the brown man lifted Chavela’s crippled hand and kissed it. “*Adios, señorita*. Be at ease. Many Norte dollars wait for you at Chihuahua...”

She spat on his shiny black shoes and turned to board the bus. He laughed and lifted up her suitcase. “Now, be nice, Chavela! Until we meet again, you will think nicely of your poor friend Azzim, eh?”

She turned at the top of the steps. “*Puerco!*” But it didn’t matter. She would hide, and then they would need her and come again. That is why the brown man was called from the islands. He could sniff her trail when they had another poor soul to kill. And always a “heart attack”. No gun, no poison, no knife. Almost perfect...

The hum and vibration of the bus lulled her and she felt herself nodding in spite of the pounding of her finger. She slipped the glove off and looked at the black fingertip. *It’s worse than the others! I’ll have to take it off. Or it’ll fall off, like the rest...*

She looked up to see a small girl across from her watching her with all the intensity of a six-year-old. Finally the child looked away and piped, “Mama! Why does that lady have such funny fingers?”

The mama shushed the child and that was that. But Chavela yanked the glove back on again and tried to sleep. Eight lost fingertips, eight men died. Ambassadors, a judge, a union leader in Costa Rica. And now the president.

Her shoes hurt her. Even these expensive, special shoes didn’t fit very well. She wished she could slip them off, but she wasn’t sure her pulsing hand would let her undo the laces.

She had a funny idle thought. Men died for her toes. Like Helen of Troy. Toes that kill instead of a face that launches ships. But then one day they were gone and the brown man started on her fingers.

*What will they choose when these are gone?*

When the brown man came again she didn’t even run to hide. “So, you are back. Where now?”

He flashed a glittering, gilded smile. “Hollywood! Lucky girl! I get you in the cinema!”

“Cinema? But why...?”

“You’ll see. Come. The car is below.”

On the way to California she lay back and tried to sleep. *Hollywood? When I was very young I dreamed of being in the movies. Like Dolores del Rio. Or a dancer, maybe, in a musical.*

*Dance? Silly woman! You were clumsy and fat and ugly!* She stretched and winced as her foot bumped against the seat support ahead of her. *Clumsier, now...*

There they were, sitting in another bus, waiting for the tour to resume. The brown man opened an envelope and brought out a picture. “Here he is!”

It was an old man with the tired, pained look of one who has loved money all his life instead of people. She looked up. "An old man?"

He shrugged. "So they give me many dollars. I don't need to know. He is too old. Others want to take his place..."

"¡Demonio! I can't kill an old man!"

He smiled that smile that she had come to fear and took her hand. "Chavela... He is nothing to you. A few minutes.... Hundreds like him die every day..."

"No! I cannot!"

He stared at her and she felt the unnamed burning, itching cross the softness of her mind. That was another reason he had been found in the islands and brought to Mexico. She knew that another thirty seconds of his stare and she would have to do it. Now or another time.

"You will, Chavela. Because you remember, eh?"

"Si." She hung her head. "When?"

"Soon. He will be coming out in a little red golf car."

They waited. The other *turistas* were off to the tour, but Chavela told them she was tired and couldn't walk any more and they didn't care. For such as she, no Norte cared anyway. Most didn't even see her.

He bumped her and pointed. The other two men were at the gate and now one was tying his shoe. Soon...

Here it came! A little golf car, as he had said. One of the brown man's friends stepped in front of the car to ask for an autograph. The old man smiled and took the pad.

"Now, Chavela!"

She held out her hand absently for the clamp. When the pain rose in her it was an old friend. She studied the tableau below, bringing her mind to focus on the freckled forehead shiny in the sun. In a second more it was over and she turned to reach for the ice in the cup.

Many people came running. In minutes the two men were gone and Chavela was holding her burning hand, trying to hide the blood seeping through the white glove. The brown man gave her the needle and covered her hand with a plastic bag. "Put your hand in your pocket, *señorita*. It bleeds badly."

Chavela was only half listening to the story on the hotel TV. Then, suddenly, horribly:

"The world was shocked today by an apparent stroke that has left rising child star Patty O'Toole unable to move or speak. Tragically, Miss O'Toole was stricken while she was riding in a lot car with movie mogul David G. Celcius, falling ill moments after he suffered his fatal heart attack. Doctors at Einstein Hospital are guardedly optimistic that the actress will regain some motor control with therapy and retraining. How much her brain has been damaged will not be known for many months....

Panatone Studio officials report that shooting of Miss O'Toole's new film, "I'll Cry No More" has been halted until another lead is found."

The brown man snapped off the set. "Ah! ¡Que lastima! Dead she would

be remembered and they would do a cinema about her. This way she will be a burden, a thing to be pitied.”

Chavela burst into tears. “She’s paralyzed! A child!”

He shrugged. “She was in the wrong place. Not your doing. Now forget it!” He pulled the suitcase from under the bed. “Here is so many dollars you can be a queen!” He laughed sardonically and raised his wine glass. “Queen Chavela!”

She went to the door. “I need some air...”

He nodded. “Fine! Don’t get lost, Chavela!”

She went out and slammed the door. At the end of the hall was a cart, and from the doorway nearby she saw smoke. Smoke?

It was nothing. Some men were repairing a pipe, and their torch had made the smoke. *They should have a care. One might be alarmed, smelling smoke in here...*

She continued to walk around the hotel. *Children, now! I must stop this!*

*How, Chavela?* He was stronger. When she tried to put the eye on him he just stood there, watching. He felt it, but she wasn’t strong enough. Then the mind-pain started....

Perhaps if she caught him asleep? Oh, but he sleeps like a snake, his eyes half open. *If only I was stronger...* If she hurt him enough, his guard would fail.

Stronger? She could be stronger if she could make the pain stronger... She held up her ruined hands. *Not these.* They cannot ever hurt more than they have.

*My eyes?* Eyes are tender. But if she did something to her eyes, her power would be gone.

*Yes! Yes! Take away the power!*

Then she thought of being a blind woman with no job, no protector, no pension. *You couldn’t even read Braille with these fingers. You’d be a vegetable. Like that poor girl.*

*But if I take the money...* She wondered how much money there was in that suitcase. *No! That has blood on it! And that poor child!*

Chavela looked around the corner at the men working on the pipes. They had left their torch on the cart. *Bueno. I have a weapon.*

In a moment she had it and the lighter. In another, she was back in her room. The brown man started when she closed the door. He had been dozing.

She twisted the valve open until the gas was hissing out. Holding the tank between her legs she worked the lighter with both crippled hands. With a loud roar the flame leaped from the burner. “Now, you fiend! I am going to burn you!”

His eyes were locked on the menacing flame just long enough for her to get bring it close to his face. Then a glance pushed his will into her, forcing her to waver. “Back, little fool! Put that down!”

She wavered long enough for him to push her back and she fell on the floor. The torch bounced away, still roaring, the flame burning the carpet in yellow, greasy streaks.

When he groped after it she kicked out with her heavy shoes. One hit the side of his head and he went down. In an instant she caught the torch and held it up triumphantly.



He looked up, his face a mask of evil. Blood was running out of his ear and mouth. “¡Perra! Bitch!”

She ignored the voice and concentrated on the eyes. *This is the moment, Chavela. Hold him!*

His malevolent stare almost took away her resolve. She could feel the power flowing from her eyes, but it was being turned back by his greater evil. Already little claws were climbing her brain...

He snickered. “So, little one, you have power, but not enough, eh?” He reached out. “Come, now, give me that toy...”

*I need more! The clamp? But it is somewhere in his luggage...*

Then the scene on the bus came flooding back. One more finger... What will they choose when these are gone?

The answer crashed into her mind like a gunshot. *No! Not that! But I must!* She yanked open her blouse.

The brown man watched, bemused. “Oho? Now you offer me your final price? Like your mother, always a price? *Put a madre, puta hija, eh?*”

She knew she was going to be hurt in a way she had never been hurt before. But she had to stop this business...

The torch took only seconds to melt through her bra. She didn't watch. She was pouring this new agony into her eyes, stabbing into the brown man's mind like stilettos.

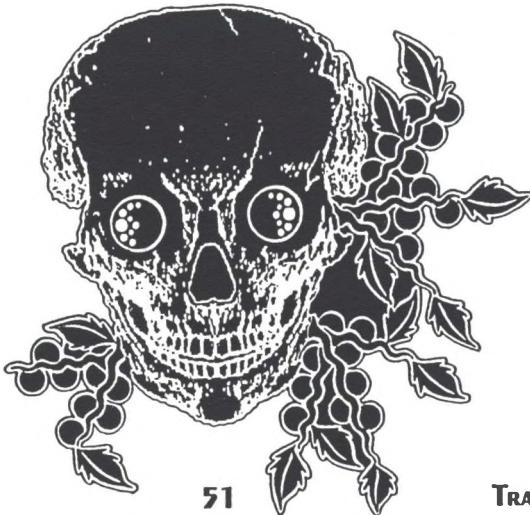
The pain was singing in Chavela's head and she started to feel faint. Smoke from the bra and her charred flesh rose before her, making her blink.

*I mustn't blink! One second more...* She juggled the torch around until she could hold it in one hand and grasp the roaring, glowing burner in her other. Steadying it, ignoring this new agony, she guided the flame to her most tender places. The room was full of the smell of spitting, crackling flesh but it didn't matter. The brown man was lying on the floor, eyes getting dusty. It was done.

Chavela allowed herself to scream, finally, and fall in a swoon on the floor. She didn't hear the footsteps coming, the men looking for their torch. But come they did, and then wasted precious seconds in gagging and turning away.



Illustration © 1995  
by Robert Baldwin  
& Cathy Buburuz



# VOICE & SILENCE by ANNICK PERROT-BISHOP

TRANSLATED by Neil B. Bishop, from "SILENCE ET LA VOIX",  
The Pottersfield Portfolio, Vol. 14, No. 1, Spring/Summer 1992.

Annick Perrot-Bishop is a francophone writer who lives in Saint-John's, Newfoundland. She has published some 30 short stories and poems in literary journals across Canada. Her book *Les Maisons de Cristal* was nominated for *Le Grand prix de la Science-Fiction et du Fantastique Québécois* and for *Le Prix Boréal*. She has recently finished a book of short stories and a collection of poems. We welcome stories in translation and hope Annick will bestow more gems like "Voice & Silence" upon us.

**Gerta shouted and shouted. So loud, that the neighbours** hid their heads under their pillows. Her voice ricocheted from wall to wall and in the whole neighbourhood people sensed that before long it would crack. A real screech threw the voice so hard against a wall that it broke. Gerta fell silent. She had lost her voice.

She squatted, trying to unite the splinters scattered on the carpet. Silence had slipped into the house and was observing the scene with a frown. It approached, helped to gather the shards of voice. It felt vaguely responsible. Why had it stayed away so long? True enough, it somehow rather disliked Gerta. The feeling was mutual, and Gerta could not long stand its presence. So she would talk and talk. And it would go away.

What frightened Gerta most was Silence's depth. She was afraid of being all wrapped up, smothered in its folds. So she preferred to perch on the tip of her voice. She felt safe there. From up high, she could see the different layers of Silence spread out below.

This time, when Gerta noticed Silence, she did not protest. She was very pleased indeed that it was helping her pick up the bits and pieces of her voice. There were all sorts of them: pale ones and sombre ones, thick or piercing, some almost stifled, others muffled, husky. A flow of words had covered the floor in a silvery murmur.

When all was gathered up, Gerta paused, sighed. She told Silence she would be happy to keep it with her, provided it would not invade the whole house. Silence gave its word, the only one it had, and which it cherished. It was a beautiful, golden word, and it had never been used. Gerta took the word, and pronounced it. Silence, charmed, smiled for the first time.

So as not to disturb Gerta, Silence settled into a little nook of the house. As she needed someone to listen to her, she sometimes went to pay it a visit, always trying to speak in an undertone. Ever since she had recovered the ability to utter sounds, she used them sparingly, and Silence would drink her words, regretting it could not speak them.

They ended up realizing that they needed each other, that neither could live alone. So they shared the house, and later, gave birth to a daughter whose laughter sparkled with speckles of gold. ❖

# **SkyLab 1973-1979**

by **CAROLYN CLINK**

Fragments of space debris  
and me, floating in vacuum  
observing the Earth.

Humans gazing up  
see only the infinite  
skin of glassine sky.

I start to tumble  
from orbit, slowly slitting  
open the envelope of night.

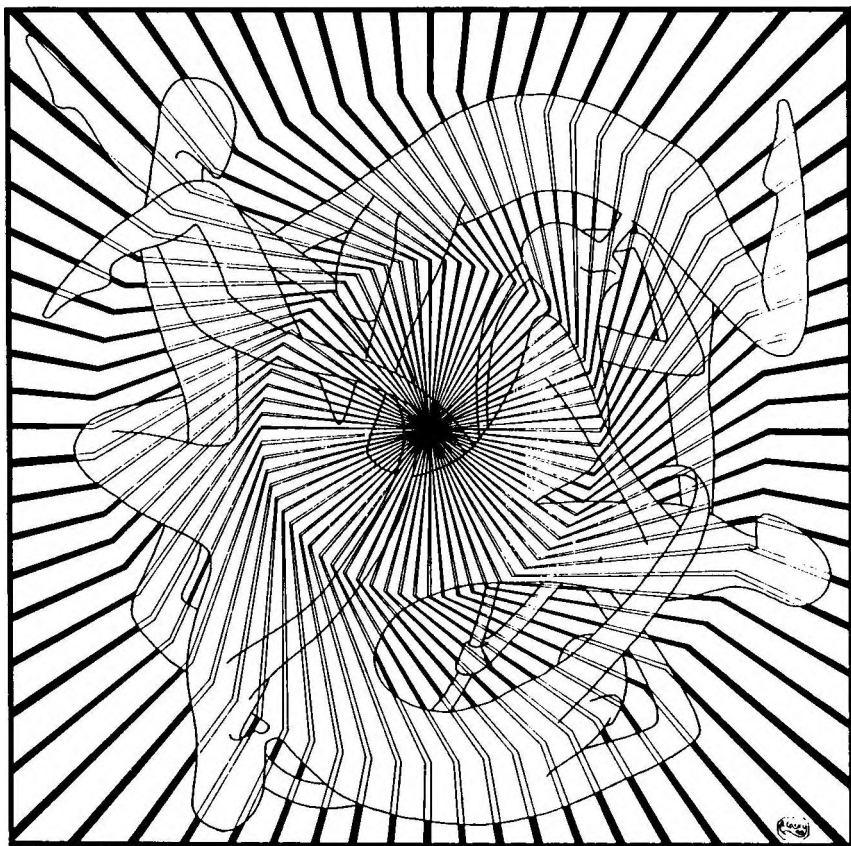
# ARES'S SEDUCTION

by Niall McGrath

My Alectryon heart crows thrice,  
Pining in a chain net,  
Caught on the mat of hollowness,  
Caged by guilt and regret:

You were not like Aphrodite,  
You denied me kisses,  
Caresses, intercourse. Absent  
Hephaestus's missis

Yet faithful as Penelope  
When pinned down, you refused  
To submit to your loins' wetness;  
Left this poor cock confused.



# HOME

by Bob Boyczuk

Toronto writer Robert Boyczuk attended the Clarion West Workshop in 1993, and since then has published three stories in *On Spec*. One of these was reprinted in *On Spec: The First Five Years*. Bob recently won first prize in a speculative writing contest sponsored by *Prairie Fire*.

**Sitting up suddenly in his coffin, Abraham shudders as the** last wisps of his dream slip away. The cover is up and he is awake, but this is not what he had expected, not at all what they had told him it would be like coming out of stasis — it is abrupt and unsettling, sharp pain where his sudden movement has torn the leads away from his scalp. His head is throbbing, his heart pounding in his chest; he brushes his fingers across his brow to wipe the perspiration from his eyes, but when his hand comes away his fingertips are red with blood. He stares at them as if from a distance, trying to remember his dream, but now that he is fully awake it is lost, its importance a dead weight. An old dream, he thinks, Maybe an old memory, though why he believes this he cannot say. But he recognizes its familiar contours, the taste of its shapeless fear.

He runs both his hands over his scalp, feeling the small rough abrasions left by the leads and thinks, I am going home.

Abraham is on duty for the next four standard months; it is his third time in the rotation, the two hundred and twenty-fourth standard year since they left Earth orbit for their new Home. He has not worked with Pill before, and misses Leyla whom he was last partnered with, misses her easy laugh and soft round body. Pill is different: he is long and thin with an angular frame and face, all elbows and knees as he leans over the panel speaking softly to Ship, reminding Abraham of the mantises he occasionally finds in the bio-pod.

Abraham misses the constant chatter of Leyla; though it was unimportant and he rarely listened to what she said, he had found it surprisingly comforting, like the murmur of a brook. But Pill keeps to himself, speaking only of their endless diagnostics —and Home.

Abraham feels the imminence of Home, too. This is one thing they share. "Soon," Pill often remarks to Abraham, his voice filled with pleasure and expectation, "soon we will be Home."

Whenever he hears these words, Abraham nods, and his mouth goes dry. His heart beats faster as he thinks of Home, a world neither man has ever seen.

Since coming out of stasis, Abraham has been having a recurring dream: he is eleven years old again, back on his father's farm in Saskatchewan. Something has happened, and he is terrified, though he cannot remember what. He runs and runs, past the outer pastures and the fodder cornfields, along the narrow dirt road that leads to the house, out of breath, heart in throat as he stumbles up the porch steps. He reaches for the screen door.

“Abraham!”

He jumps back, turns to where he had not noticed his father sitting, leaning back in the lawn chair, feet on railing.

“Abraham,” his father looks at him. “What’s the matter?”

“I ... P ... Pa ...”

His father lifts his feet and lets his chair down. “Now, now,” he says, rising from his seat, a large dark-haired man, towering over Abraham, casting him in shadow. “Just tell me what’s happened.”

“PAUL!” The word bursts from him like an awful revelation, and, as always, throws Abraham abruptly from his sleep and back into the sweat tangled sheets of his bunk.

This morning, like every morning for the last two weeks, Ship has prepared a new maintenance schedule. Abraham watches as Pill executes the specified tests with a demented glee, leaning, white-knuckled, over the square of his diagnostic monitor, each correct readout seeming to intensify his pleasure — and stoking his need for more.

Abraham shakes his head, moves his own monitor without enthusiasm to the next testing station.

Doesn't Pill know these diagnostics are pointless? That Ship could look after itself better than fumbling humans ever could? Abraham understands this because he had thought to ask Ship about it during his last shift. It's the humans who need these periodic wakings, who need to experience the psychological reality of the journey. This is the component they are missing, Ship had explained to him. During stasis, Ship does what it can, manipulating the limbic system and hypothalamus through microvolt impulses, stimulating the production of dopamine and norepinephrine to shape the dreams of those in stasis. And over the course of decades, it creates a counterfeit desire for the planet towards which they are hurtling.

A desire for Home.

And, as he thinks this, Abraham's throat constricts, beads of perspiration form on his forehead, and his hands beginning to shake over his monitor.

No, Abraham thinks. Ship is wrong. It is not a desire for Home.

It is an addiction.

“What are you doing?”

Pill's question startles Abraham, who is knee deep in the ditch he has been digging. His clothes are soiled and he is covered in a fine sheen of sweat. He tries to hide his agitation as he answers, “Nothing,” but his voice sounds petulant, even to him. “Exercise. That's all.”

Pill is surveying the bed of Abraham's creek, looking down on him where he stands a meter deep in the small, crooked channel he is digging. It runs fifty meters, the entire length of the room, and along one bank is a mound where Abraham has piled the stones and dirt he has unearthed. Several bushes and a few larger trees lie uprooted from the soil.

“You're late,” Pill says, frowning. He turns abruptly, stepping over a bag



of fertilizer, and is gone, leaving Abraham alone in the pod.

Abraham dreams: he is back on the farm and it is a warm cloudless day. For a moment he is confused, not sure what he is doing here, down by the small creek that runs along the foot of the back pasture. He is standing next to the old willow tree whose roots curl and dip into the cool water, and he stares through its drooping branches at blue shards of sky.

Though everything is familiar, he's forgotten why he's here.

Then he remembers.

It is Sunday, and he's here with his younger brother, Paul.

"Paul!" he shouts, but there is no answer. "Paul!" he shouts again, wandering down the creek, past the old willow.

He stoops to pick up a broken twig, and swishes it like a sword. His runners make small sucking sounds as they stick then pull free of the mud by the bank.

"Pa —" he stops in mid-shout, drops his stick.

Twenty meters ahead a small form lies face down in the creek.

Abraham stands perfectly still, thinking, No, its only a rock or tree stump or something else. But in his stomach he feels a rising bolus of panic. His legs seem to turn of their own accord. He runs and runs, past the outer pastures and the fodder cornfields, along the narrow dirt road that leads to the house, out of breath, heart in throat as he stumbles up the porch steps, reaching once again for the screen door.

Abraham steps back to survey his work. He is proud of the stream which is almost complete — it took some time before he could find the right kind of material to line the bottom, but he discovered a roll of ultra-lite plastic sheeting that had been provided for constructing shelters upon their arrival; he has taken only a small portion of the huge roll, trimming it away cleanly with a cutting laser, knowing it is unlikely it will ever be missed. The liner is grey and he has buried its edges beneath dirt and stone to form small banks. He has also covered the bottom of the creek with a thin layer of fine sand and then filled this over with what pebbles and stones he could gather from the bio-sphere, pleased that the grey of the vinyl is hardly visible. With water in it, the liner will be virtually impossible to see.

He smiles, wiping his hands on the back of his shorts.

Tomorrow he will begin work on the water system.

"I'm sorry," Abraham says, even though he is not at all sorry. "I don't have time."

Pill strikes the table with the flat of his hand, startling Abraham. "Don't have time?"

Abraham shakes his head, ignoring Pill's anger. They stare at one another across a small table in the centre of the observation dome; overhead the ceiling projector displays a vast expanse of stars. Abraham's heart skips a beat as he notes the smudge directly above his head has now become a small, well-

defined circle of blue and green and white. He had not wanted to come, does not like the dome, had only made the concession to get Pill out of his bio-pod, as far away from it as he could.

"We've only got three weeks left," Pill says. "Two days to complete the analysis on the main fusion drive before we begin braking. We've already fallen behind schedule because of you!"

Abraham says nothing, ignoring the coiled tension of Pill's need. He feels it too, this urgent necessity to make the preparations for Home.

Instead he shakes his head. "I can't. Believe me, I would if I had the time, but I've got my own problems —"

"Home!" Pill shouts, pointing to the screen that hangs over them. "We are almost Home! What's wrong with you? We've got to finish our assignments! What if the main engine misfires? Or if it's misaligned? There won't be any second chances!" Abraham feels a tightening in his chest, and can see Pill has closed his fists and is trembling. "Don't you want to go Home?" he asks Abraham, hissing through clenched teeth, as if it were a challenge, a threat.

"Ship takes care of itself ...." Abraham's words trail off weakly. He has worked hard, and would accommodate Pill, but there are so few hours left he cannot afford to give up another precious minute to Ship's useless games. He must complete his project. For the last three days he has spent all his time in the bio-pod, doing his best to ignore Pill's incessant interruptions, so busy that he has skipped rest periods and more than once forgotten to eat. He believes that if only he can finish before he returns to his coffin it might somehow change things.

Pill hammers his fist on the table so hard that it jumps, a glass falling on its side and rolling over the edge to drop on the floor with a hollow ring. His face is red; the tendons in his neck stand out like small ridges.

"I want to help you, Pill, really I do, but —"

"Enough!" Pill shouts, knocking the table back and pushing past Abraham so roughly that the smaller man staggers and almost loses his balance.

Abraham knows there is nothing more he can say to appease Pill as he watches him stalk from the dome. Pill, he thinks, is out of control. He can think of nothing but Home. I must be careful not to let him ruin things.

Abraham has taken to sleeping in the bio-pod. Only when hunger presses him does he reluctantly leave to retrieve food from the galley. He believes Pill watches him, has seen the tall man skulking around the pod lock. Once, returning from the galley, he'd spotted Pill darting from the bio-pod. Abraham had dropped his bundle then, and raced down the long corridor, cursing and screaming at Pill, shaking his fist in the air. He had wanted to kill Pill at that moment, and had he had a weapon he might have done it, firing at that retreating form until it crumpled in a satisfying heap on the floor. But there are no weapons onboard, at least none Abraham knows about, and even the cutting lasers have a safety he has been unable to defeat.

He had checked carefully after securing the door, sealing it from the inside manually, and could find nothing amiss, everything just as he had left it.

But Pill's intrusion had shaken him severely. Enough so that another day

passed before he dared venture out of the pod to retrieve the food scattered in the corridor, the pangs of hunger finally conquering his fear.

Abraham has cut the speaker to the bio-pod.

For the last two days Pill had been using it to entreat him to rejoin the maintenance work, painting a hundred possible scenarios of disaster should they not complete their designated tasks. At first, Abraham had ignored these rantings; but when Pill began to shout and scream incoherently, raging at Abraham, naming him as the betrayer of Ship, of those in stasis, of Home, he cut the line.

He can see that Pill is coming unhinged, that he has been programmed by Ship to think of nothing but Home. Abraham imagines that each day the idea of Home grows in Pill like a tumour, consuming everything else, leaving no room for any other thought except the belief that Abraham will somehow subvert the mission, perhaps even destroy Ship.

No, Abraham thinks, I will not destroy Ship. He has already considered his situation carefully and feels he has a good chance of fooling Ship's sensors with false images. He has envisaged himself outside in his suit, crawling along the main grid, attaching his own small box to the mast housing where it will intercept and alter the signals. This, he thinks, will be the simplest route, to let Ship believe in the destruction of that little round circle that it calls Home, to let it think its torpid thoughts and conclude that it must change its course, find a new destination, another Home. Ship is, after all, only a computer, barely sentient, and easy to fool.

Pill, he now realizes, is his real problem. He is certain Pill will never leave him alone, will not return to his coffin at the appointed time as long as Abraham is awake. He cannot, for such an act would gnaw away at Pill's consciousness incessantly like a parasite, unravelling the carefully contrived pattern Ship has built in his skull.

So Abraham does what he must do.

He grabs a shovel and walks over to his stream where it jogs around a small willow. It is his favourite spot, reminding him of the one where he and Paul often played after school. Pill will like it here, he thinks, and drives the blade of the shovel into the soft earth with the bottom of his boot.

Abraham steps from the bio-pod and orders the door sealed behind him. Out here, in the open corridor, he feels naked and dizzy. He is sweating freely and his breathing is shallow and raspy. His heart hammers fiercely against his ribs. It's the first time he's been out of the pod in four days and he is light-headed from hunger. But he is not headed for the galley. Instead, he turns in the opposite direction, towards the crew quarters.

The corridor is long, and Abraham must pass many junctions; he pauses before each open passageway, first listening carefully, then darting as silently as he can past the openings. Soon, he comes to a junction wider than most; sucking in a breath, he pokes his head around the corner.

There are six doors in this new corridor; all are open — except for third one on the left, the one that marks Pill's cabin. In the dimly lit corridor, the red

lock-light on Pill's door shines like a beacon.

Relief washes over Abraham. The only time Pill shuts his cabin door is when he is inside, sleeping. If nothing else, Pill is a creature of habit, and this is the time Ship has designated as his rest period.

Abraham steps gingerly into the corridor, then slips past Pill's room without a sound. He continues down the hall to the last door on the right, pausing on the threshold, caught in a moment of uncertainty. What if he didn't put it away? What if it's not there? But then he reminds himself that Pill's faith in official procedures is as strong as his belief in Home. Abraham steps through the door.

Pill's diagnostic monitor sits in its rack, just where it should be.

Elated, Abraham grabs it. In his hands he holds the only working monitor on Ship. His own he has smashed, and the backup units he has taken from the storage pods and hidden. Now, he thinks, heart thumping loudly in his chest, Pill must come to me! And I'll be ready for him! Tucking the unit under his arm, he turns and slips out of the room, moving swiftly down the corridor and past Pill's room, no longer fearful of making noise, intent only on the safety of the bio-pod. He clutches Pill's monitor to his chest as if it were a young child, almost losing his balance as he turns the sharp corner to the central corridor, pounding down that long expanse, his lungs burning with the exertion, throwing himself through the open door to the pod and shouting "CLOSE!" as he flies through.

For a breathless moment he stands there, watching the thick metal doors seal behind him, gulping air wildly into his lungs in ragged gasps, his fear giving way to understanding, then exhilaration, thinking, I've got it! I've got it! Now Pill must come to me.

He can feel the smile growing inside him, about to burst forth, and he wants to shout aloud his triumph. It was easy, he thinks, As easy as it will be when Pill arrives, and stepping back he imagines the cold hard rock that will be in his hand as he watches Pill, tall lanky foolish Pill, stepping from the corridor through the open door —

Open door, Abraham thinks, and blinks slowly, staring at the bio-pod door. Didn't I order it seal—

Pain explodes in Abraham's skull. Darting lights obscure his vision, angry insects whine in his ears. Far away he feels his fingers go slack, Pill's monitor drop. He staggers forward a pace, his knees buckling, something wet and sticky trickling down the side of his head. Another explosion, jagged flashes, his knees finally giving way, the world spinning around him, earth rushing up towards him, some part of him thinking Pill, and knowing despair, knowing he has lost, thinking, I can't go home. Please don't make me go home ....

He tastes earth in his mouth, soft brown soil, and rolls onto his back, the grid of plant lights high above now making his eyes hurt, a tall stick figure blocking the light, and Abraham can see one of its arms pulled back, hand holding a dark round object. A rock, he thinks, and it reminds him of something, reminds him of a time when he had held a rock just so, back on the farm. Paul, he remembers suddenly, he wouldn't leave me alone. Childhood anger wells in him again as it had that day, incensed at his small brother who tagged along everywhere, the growing frustration and the solid weight of the rock in his fist. Leave me alone, he

had warned him, Just go away or else, but his brother had only backed off when he saw Abraham scoop up the rock, had taken two steps back into the creek where he stood, unmoving, eyes round with fear. He watches as that other Abraham raises his arm, thinking, No, it was an accident. Paul slipped and hit his head and drowned. Everyone said so. Abraham can feel tears welling in his eyes, and through the soft unfocussed blur he can see the shadowy figure move forward and grow to eclipse the light. I couldn't tell them.

Paul, he thinks as darkness wells up, forgive me.

Though he is conscious, Abraham cannot seem to open his eyes. It is an odd feeling, like they have been glued shut. So instead, he tries to raise his arm, but the attempt nauseates him and sends sharp bolts of pain through his head; he nearly slips back into the pool of blackness.

"Don't move, Abraham," he can hear Pill saying, the words muffled and distant. "I've given you a mild paralytic. You'll only hurt yourself."

Abraham senses Pill hovering over him.

"I'm sorry, but you gave me no choice."

Abraham opens his eyes slowly, millimetre by millimetre, the effort requiring enormous concentration.

"Your shift is over, Abraham. It's time to go back to sleep."

Pill's thin figure finally comes into focus, long fingers untangling the familiar leads, snapping them into the sockets on the side of Abraham's coffin.

"I patched you up as best I could, and I think you'll be all right. All you need is rest. A long sleep." Pill smiles down at him. "Ship will fix you up."

Abraham can feel the sluggish movement of hair trying to rise on his arms and legs as Pill rubs conducting gel on the back of his neck and scalp where the leads attach. Then the tall man steps back, out of sight, towards the coffin's head. Abraham hears a soft click as Pill powers the stasis field up.

"I've run the diagnostics on your coffin. Everything is fine. Perhaps there was a temporary glitch, a hiccough. But it's gone now."

Pill reappears on the coffin's left side. Abraham wants to tell him that he is wrong, that there was no malfunction, no glitch. That it is him, Abraham, that's broken. That he has a memory he can no longer suppress, a seed of guilt, lodged in his brain, that will flower into madness as he sleeps. But when he tries to speak his lips move only with a slight tremble, and Pill seems not to notice.

"When you come out of stasis next time we'll be Home. And this whole thing will seem like a bad dream." Pill squeezes Abraham's shoulder reassuringly, lifts his hand to press the final switch.

The air above Abraham's face distorts, then seems to coalesce, blurring his vision. He wants to sob, but cannot. All around him the stasis field creeps up, lapping at the edges of his consciousness, his skin warm and tingling now, as if fine-grained sand were being poured around him, rising along the sides of his coffin, spilling over onto his arms, legs, chest. Suffocating him.

"Don't worry," he hears Pill's voice, a smothered sound, like the murmur of a distant brook. "Soon you'll be Home." ❖



# FEVRE

by  
ADAM  
CORBIN  
FUSCO

Adam Fusco, a Maryland writer, has credits that include *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror #7*, *Touch Wood: Narrow Houses 2*, *Young Blood*, *Expanse* and *Beyond* (UK). We're sure you'll be seeing more of Adam's stylish (and occasionally incendiary) work in upcoming issues of this magazine.



**New Year's Eve, Neman notices the orange glow of his wrist**  
therm reading 99.9. The light has diffused in the empty plastic jugs he holds that long ago contained Cloverland milk. He turns for a last look into the bedroom. All that is visible is the wood-slat blinds aiming strips of streetglow onto a bed out of view, where Arroyo is. A tear makes a dust-track down his cheek. He would have saved it if he could; all the water chits are gone.

Beetle steps of moth-eaten paper walls. Neman walks through a once marbled foyer into the sooted night where woodsmoke is and the humidity of lost moisture. He feels furtive and guilty; he is going out to steal.

Ghost shapes of hangers-on. Neman passes people on the street, shuffling his feet, wary of getting too close. If he could read their wrist therms ahead of time he'd know. A man in rotted jeans and flannel passes him, brushing. Neman catches the first whiff of umber, of mildewed mushroom, of burning fetal pigs, sees the cobalt glow tracing snakes along the man's skin. Neman stops, transfixed; he has never been this close before. Others on the street move out of the way.

Candle flame, the man's hair stands on end. The heat is fanned convectionally by the cold of the street, rising in sparks. The skin is a gas-jet glow, quite beautiful; Neman can see the man's face through it, an expression of ecstasy, the open mouth fending off flame with CO<sub>2</sub>, but then the fire, hungrily, sensing fresh meat, dives into the maw, the sound of moth wings singeing. Parchment paper skin is dotted by black ink flame, then cracking, out of oil, peeling back, red turning crisp, until it flakes off falling. The sound is a roar since there are no more lungs; it is the heady wisp of bone turned iron.

Sooty column falling. Neman turns clutching the empty jugs. His feet are clay, his legs wobble-sticks. Why did it have to happen tonight? If he had left a little earlier, if he had left a little later, he would not have seen it at all. He had always been careful not to go out too often. The last time he had seen was in a silk shop, scant weeks ago, about the time Arroyo had taken to her bed; and it was an old woman, her grey hair glowing by a snaking blue flame she noticed too late. Neman ran before he could see more, and now he had seen it all over again. He would be plagued once more by bat-wing skin, jelly boilings, kindling hair curling, Arroyo....

Cobbles washed clean by ash. Neman crosses an oldtown street, past a confection of shops discarded by the new decade, into a square fronted on two sides by columned government structures. They are dark night and day, not too many people to house them, but the fountain in the middle still functions, a spring of hope, as if people could be fooled. The other two sides are squared by derailed commuter trains brought in by the old rails, their silver flash invitingly wet, their promise of safe compartmentalized housing not totally fulfilled: fabric burns too.

Fetal dark husk lying on its side. Neman gives it plenty of room as he approaches the fountain. He feels the surreptitious slink of the illegal. He leans over the pitted lip of the pedestaled fountain, cherub gazing at him from the middle of it, and fills the jugs with murky water. He notes the look of craftsmanship of the statuary, misses the feel of chisel and hammer in his own hands, once held long ago, when he worked on the new Cathedral, now abandoned.

Tinkle of water from the infant's penis. Neman lifts the jugs away feeling ashamed to stoop so low as to steal from the city's art, having once created it. Beyond the giggle of water he hears a murmuring voice. With the jugs heavy in his hands he peeks around the pedestal, sees a man take a thin stick of wood from a girl sitting under the fountain overhang, clink coins into her hand. The man springs away, happy.

Incendiaries were illegalized long ago. Neman knows she has in her oiled cylinder a cache of matches. There are circles of light spaced concentric around the fountain; she sits to the side of one, and the slosh of Neman's jugs makes her turn enough to see her. Bird's nest hair sooted by experience, made of straw, waif eyes peek through it, shy, at him. The arms are articulated pipings, the legs scarecrow things. Her shift is an afterthought. Moon-complected, he notes, sees the sheen on forehead and cheeks.

They are two people having caught each other in the illicit; Neman feels a terrible attraction to her dirtiness, her street-life neediness. Look what she sells for a few pennies. He turns, must get away, but not before he sees her draw a match from the cylinder, strike it on its bottom, and inch the flame into her mouth, paper cheeks Japanese lanterns. Eyes on his, she clamps down to put it out. She chitters laughter.

Smoke fingers against the black sky. Neman shuffles away, water sloshing. He's horrified by what he's seen, her disregard, her uncaring. Perhaps the sickness affects behaviour as well, he thinks; the same bifurcation, the same period doubling, that results in boiling blood. Sickness X affects people at different rates, until it reaches the chaos point. It strikes the brain too; the match girl has confirmed it.

Dizzy with heat and fear, he is glad he cannot see his wrist therm. He reaches the formerly marbleized foyer only after glimpsing in an alley, for the beat of a heart, the arch of a form outlined in blue flame and sickly smell, chasing its tail, though it is not a dog.

Sectioned by the wood-slat light, Arroyo languishes in the bed. Neman splashes water over her feet. Her touch is a burning coal. He dribbles water over calves, thighs. He adjusts the white silk she wears, dampens it to help cool her skin, belly and breasts. Her hair is matted, tarnished. Copper eyelids flutter. High cheekbones slide into hollows. Green eyes as if emeralds found in desert sand now shine with sickness X.

Sprinkling water over her forehead and chin, so that it pools in the cup where collarbones meet, Neman curses himself for staying out too long, for dallying at the fountain, where the girl with matches is. Arroyo is worse of just that span of time. Her hands clutch at the bed sheets. Her head lolls back and forth. These are hands, he thinks, that once sculpted hard things, now turned to claws.

She was a sculptor too, but of the abstract. She was able, unlike him, to see the shape and essence of a thing, to get behind it. He was a realist, on the other, could only put in stone, if not what was real, at least the recognizable. Gargoyles, cherubs, saints, and devils passed through his hands while hers made Mobius strips of granite, ballet lines of brass.

A faint sweet caramel burning touches his nose, and desperate, he dumps

the rest of the jug over her, soaking the bed. He places the wet sheets over her legs. She kicks them off.

Perhaps she had seen the abstract in him. She was ten years younger, full of an idealism that infected her work, whereas he trod the ground of the blessed or the damned. The fact that someone like her fell in love with him, so late in his life, was always an ache to him. She must have seen some abstract thing beneath his granite front. Younger, he used to push it away if someone saw the same.

A cobalt snake, the flame wriggles past her ankle. Neman's heart flops as he splashes water over it from the other jug. A blackened line scrawls her skin.

Her eyes focus on him. "Neman..."

"Hush, now. Hush." He would cry soon.

"I'm having dreams."

"You have to let me cover you."

"They're too hot."

"But if one little—"

"They're awful. It's a face. Staring eye to eye. With me. Its mouth is opening and closing, opening and closing. Real fast, boop, boop, boop, and it won't stop staring. But I see myself, or it, running, little legs, bam, bam, bam, each stride like a mile. Real close, and real far—I don't know. And everything's happening real fast. Fast. Faster." She struggles, kicks sheets.

"You have to let me help you."

"And sometimes there's this room, a museum, real clean, super clean, and everything's in its place, on display, and I'm standing still, but, like, going to each exhibit, beat, beat, beat, like slides real fast, one after the other, but ... I'm not moving. And they start to flicker, like strobing, and it gets faster—" Her face scrunches as if to cry, but X has already dried her tears.

Neman monitors every inch of her skin. It's futile, he thinks; it happens to everybody. I'm the only one trying to help, trying to prevent it. Arroyo can't help herself.

Sizzling sand, the skin of her thigh is drying up the water, little bubbles pushing through like frying-pan fat. He kneads it away with water from the jug.

"And sometimes I'm on this—this plain," she says. "With grass. Everything totally flat. Completely empty. But very far away are these enormous mountains. And I think, they're closer than I think, much closer, but I don't want to think that, because if I think that, they'll get closer, they'll fall on top of me. As long as I don't think that they'll stay far away. And the plain will stay beautiful. But it's so open to the sky it's scary. It's so exposed. And Bennis is there."

She hasn't mentioned her dead brother for months, certainly never during the weeks she's been bed-ridden.

The water is gone. Arroyo grows silent. He folds the sheets over her. He has to get more water before more flames start along her skin.

Down the stairs, and out to the slap of ashen cobbles; he thinks I have to get more water; if I'm there when it happens, if it happens, and I can't prevent it, I'll go crazy. I won't stand to see her burn.

Dipping the jugs into the fountain, he sees the girl with matches complete another transaction. He watches as the jugs well up with water, lifts them out, and

catches in the corner of his eye an orange column. It is the man who bought the match, running, wrapped in flame, until he collapses, body turning inward, curling fetally like a shaving of blackened wood.

"You do that?" he says at the match girl. "That's what you're selling those for?"

She lifts singed pencil-brows. "Who's the water for?"

"Why are you doing it?"

"You dousing someone, huh?"

"I'm trying to help someone. You're just—"

Flick of sulphur, flame erupts. "You just don't know the visions, man. I'm helping people along. Combustion is the ultimate high. Haven't you ever killed a few brain cells?" She does the trick again, the flame entering her mouth, extinguishing. She eats fire, he thinks. She's a demon. "When they all go at once, it's the most incredible thing you ever seen."

"You don't care."

"It's because I care, water man. You torturing someone? What's your temp? You got visions?"

"My wife does. She—"

"Pretty Polly, I'm sure. You just hanging on, right? She's seeing bits of what she'll see when she goes, and you preventing that. You not doing it for her, you doing it for you. My grandmother say souls are flame. When they go up to the stars—"

"What does she say about you doing this?"

"She went up. Her wrist therm went *nova*."

"I have to go."

"Let her live the moment, man. You keep trying to put it off to the future."

He shuffles away, panicking, the words of the girl dogging his feet. "Hey, water man, didn't you want to buy a *match*?"

His face is hot. There are columns of smoke rising all around him, faces of onion skin turning black, wanderers searching, weaving through the square, digging coins to buy a match.

Through the foyer up the stairs, each step ticking off a tingling in his nose; it must be the rotting walls. But as he gets nearer to the room he knows what it is, the sickly-sweet smell, burnt caramel, mould leaves, curling insect wings. He doesn't dare go into the room. He thinks I won't see her; I can't. The jugs drop from his hands, the slippery wet undermining his feet as he goes down. I was too late. I stayed at the fountain too long, and I did it on purpose because I couldn't stand to be here when it happened. I couldn't stand to see the flame licking her face.

He won't look at his wrist therm as he runs to the square. Heat prickles his hair. Sweat needles his face. Anger and grief constrict his throat. Skyscrapers lean toward him. Street lines skew toward a crooked horizon. He is running forever. The buildings move closer on his sides, fleeing from his front; he is escaping from those behind.

Breathing in little bursts that sound like screams, he hears from every side bird calls of flame, the sound of peeling skin, peppering flesh, the pop of fingernails bursting. Ragged bodies shuffle toward his, flying into his face, staring; they stare

forever as he runs, and their mouths open and close as fast as jackhammers, as fast as his heart. And with every opening and closing a flame is building in the back of their throats, bigger with each flap of their jaws so that it strobos beaming from between their teeth.

It must be near midnight, he thinks; everyone in the city is buying a match. It's the bifurcation point, the period-doubling, -trebling, -quadrupling. Instead of the sickness increasing at different rates, it has harmonized, all temperatures raising notch by notch as one. And each one is a candle, the flame of the soul rising up, and higher, to reach a sky that is vast above a plain that is flat and totally exposed.

Cherub creature crouching with horned wings. Neman ducks underneath it into the fountain to feel the waters lap at his burning skin. It cools in blue rivulets. He rests his head on the damp granite. He sees through his tears a curled figure on the ground. It is blackened charwood. The spine is bent like kindling tips. Blue flame nibbles the last of the shift; it had come from the inside out. The smell of fetal pig, fat ham sizzling. The cylinder of match sticks in her hand is all burned up.

The water of the fountain sways his body. He stays that way for a long time, thinks, I'll never know if she did it herself, or her body for her. After a while there is blue on the far horizon. The girl with the matches was wrong, he thinks. She wasn't helping people; she was in it for herself, wanting to see people die, wanting to hasten it along, because she was bitter. About her grandmother. Perhaps. As I am bitter now.

Neman is floating. The horizon line is pink spreading end to end. He floats in a giant room. The floor is flat, vast, but there are dottings all along it like solo mountains, which are made of granite and bronze. They are shapes like Mobius strips. They are ballet tracings.

Salmon swath increases in bands. The sunrise is a sunset, fiery glare of anger red.

As he moves through the room he sees a woman behind a sculpture of tined infinity lines which she can never finish. She wears a white smock dotted with her past works and a red bandanna from which her hair peeks out in wisps. She must brush a lank with the back of her hand. Her face is dotted with plaster dust, and when she smiles her eyes crimp fetchingly. The liquid flow of lips and sparkle fill his heart. Her head is tilted as she looks at him, relieved. Her posture is bad enough to endear her to him. Her name is Arroyo.

Disk of sun slipping free; perhaps he sees its reluctance to leave the birthing slit of the horizon. The bottom of the circle elongates until it snaps into place from water tension.

There are rooms and rooms, and he floats through each. The water of the fountain has bubbled away. He understands the girl with matches now. *Now*, is what she meant. And every now, every room, contains Arroyo, or a sick bed, or a dish of vanilla, or a rose, or the match girl's grandmother. These are not grand visions, he chides her; they are memories.

The sun expands, grows huge. It stares at him endlessly until it fills his eyes, horizon to horizon. It burrows into his brain, turning hot, turning blue. ❖



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# PLEISTOCENE BEBOP Shift

by JOE MURPHY

Joe Murphy has just returned from a stint at Clarion West, and when he recovers from the experience we hope he'll be primed and ready to write more boppin'-good tales like this one. Joe has sold many stories to such magazines as *Aberrations*, *Bardic Runes*, *Midnight Zoo*, *Silver Web* and *Sirius Visions*, as well as the anthology *Cthulhu's Heirs*.

**Lost in the moment, bomp diddy bomp, Ginger lives in his** drums. Spiral galaxies of sweat-drops spin from his hands. Tom-tom trembles, high-hat hissing overhead. Rhythms appear behind his eyelids, masquerading as trucks, herky jerky driving across wavy waist-high grass. Big red and black trucks wearing night-tinted windows.

Lost in an ever-changing rhythm, Ginger squints at the dark windshields. Bomp debomp, red eyes gaze back, plastered against the glass. Big eyes, blinking with free-flowing patterns; stormy eyes, ancient pupils; blood vessels pulse with his left foot bass drumming.

Ginger jerks his arm, deliberately leaving the upbeat empty air. A thousand trucks rumble by, swishing the debomp bomp grass. Grass like he's never seen, scrubby trees dancing in the distance. Almost he finds it. Teeth tearing at his lower lip, hands flinging, desperately clenching sweat-slick sticks that move on their own. Not a rhythm but a pulse, not a beat but a feeling, he hangs on in white-knuckled desperation.

Almost, bompdy, got it, another hundred hits to nirvana. Ginger lashes at the cymbals, hammers the tom-tom, sizzle-burns the snare. Ancient eyes full of primitive secrets, blood-red pupils, peering from the truck. Ginger grins up at them, cheeks crinkling three-quarter wonder beats. Left hand zipping at the cow bell, he. . .

"For crying out loud, motherfucker." Marlin appears beside him, paint-worn Fender Stratocaster clenched to his breast. The air throbs with ringing feedback. "Jeezuuus. What the hell are you doing?" The pipe-thin black-denim Marlin stomps up to the drums. Black hair, chalk white skin, an undead version of Jerry Lee Lewis, charring holes in Ginger's concentration. The Rhythm dissolves, lost, kaput. Windswept grass full of trucks segues, like a bad sit-com, into the dust-smelling rickety wood of the garage. Ginger blinks.

"What's wrong, man?" His three-quarter-time question spills through the surprise O mouth.

"The song, remember?" Marlin leans over the drums, Stratocaster threatening to impale Ginger's chest. "That was supposed to be 'Time and Time Again' by the Smithereens. It's in four four. Classic rock and roll, my man. Classic drive-it-to-the-max beat. That's what I thought we decided to play. What were you playing?"

"Guess I got off." Ginger looks down at his hands, thinking of red and black trucks.

"No shit." Marlin about faces, marching to his Marshall amp. Feedback bellows till he hits a switch. The garage echoes, echoes, echoes into silence.



"Hey, I'm sorry." Ginger tosses his sticks onto the snare, hearing a two beat whisper echo in his own mind. His butt lifts from the stool, plastic squelching in the sudden quiet. The garage sighs with him. Traffic noise drifts in from the real world; trucks, sounding slow and red and black.

"That's the third time today." Marlin reaches for a half-empty Coke bottle. "Are you fucking with me? What the hell kind of beat is that anyway?"

"It's not a beat." Ginger stares at the dust-covered floor.

"Just stop playing it, all right?"

"I've only played it wrong." Ginger's butt slams back into the stool. He's too miserable to get up, too restless to sit down. "That's the trouble, see?"

Light blasts from the suddenly opening door. Rich golden sunlight surrounds a chubby girl-shadow. "What's never happened before?" Pleiades, dressed in her mother's retrograde bell bottoms, asks. Door closing behind her vanquishes the sun. She grins at them, the grin melts into a wary frown.

"My head hears something." Ginger's mouth shoots for a smile, settles for a tight-lipped slash. "Not a beat, but a pulse."

"What's the difference?" Marlin moves past so Pleiades can reach her bass.

"Your beat never changes." Ginger starts.

"Damn straight. Rock and Roll gospel." Marlin nods. "You can dance to it all night and your feet will still be there in the morning."

"But not with a pulse?" Pleiades' golden tan fingers switch on her amp.

"No." Even when Ginger shakes his head, he feels the herky jerky rhythm. "It's always different."

"Got that right," Marlin growls. "Impossible to play."

"I said I was sorry," Ginger half shouts.

"No you didn't." Marlin shrugs and looks at Pleiades. "Well, he didn't."

"So what's the problem here?" Pleiades' brown curls brush back beneath her hand.

"I keep hearing this rhythm." Ginger's hands spread helplessly. "That used to happen all the time and I could play any of them. Not this one. I can't play it, can't get it out of my head."

"Maybe you could work on it when you're alone." Pleiades' full mouth crinkles up. "Got more important things now. Surprise City, dudes, we got a gig!"

"No shit?" Marlin's eyebrows dart to the top of his head.

"You're jiving." Ginger's spine crackle-snaps with fear. A gig should be the greatest thing in the world, validation for the band. He's played them before but not with these guys. Pleiades and Marlin are sophomores at River Flats Community College, he's only a freshman. Back at Quannah High he played every Friday night at the Rec centre, but just to chums and buddies.

"Where?" Marlin asks, high heeled cowboy boots castanets-clicking rhythms of excitement.

"The Armoury." Pleiades blows a fast riff off her bass, "Hundred dollars for the night, boys. Big time here we come!"

"If we don't get tossed off the stage 'cause of spaz-boy here." Marlin's glare stabs at him. Ginger shrinks and looks down at his drums. In the three beat

sudden silence, a far-away truck herky jerks down a street. Fingers tap back at it, searching to find the pulse in his mind. Fingers fail once again, shrivelled up by fear's trembling counterpoint.

"He'll do all right." Pleiades eclipses Marlin, a merry Madonna smile sun-flashing his way. "You can do it, eh Ginger? You can keep the beat for cool cash."

Ginger swallows, looking up. Pleiades' eyes mirror the red telltale lights from the amps. Her smile broadens. "Yeah, I can handle it," he says, peering around her, nodding at Marlin. Head up, head down in perfect four four. Marlin grins but it doesn't help. Ginger shivers back into the pulse he can't play. Nerves maybe, he wonders, or stage fright? Neither sounds right. Fear, real gut clenching fraidy-cat panic shoots out his mouth. "But how we gonna get our stuff there? Got no wheels."

"No problem 'tall." Pleiades sparkles. "They're even sending a truck for us. Be here in an hour, guys. It's red and black."

The truck horn bellows like a wild thing in rage, shiver-shaking the garage, trampling their music beneath shave-and-a-haircut hooves. Ginger almost wets himself and drops his sticks. Two-bits hitting the snare, completing not the rhythm but the pulse.

"Come on, guys." Pleiades jerks her amp's plug from the socket. "Let's move."

"Don't let us down, man." Marlin gives Ginger a fish-eyed stare as he lays his Stratocaster in its cradle case.

"I'll handle it." Ginger doesn't meet his eyes. The horn still wails in his head, hammering the four four out of his heart. Counterpoint trembling fingers pick up the high hat cymbal. Android legs carry out their program by taking him into the sunshine.

A red and black behemoth idly rumbles, nearly filling the street. More powerful than a pickup, able to leap your average semi in a single bound, it's like no truck he's ever seen—except behind his eyelids. No chrome on this monster: black bumpers, red fenders, black windshield, red hood and top; the paint shimmers without metallic overtones, mimicking chiselled stone. Ginger stares up at a black hood ornament, big as his head.

"What is that, a mammoth?" he mutters as Pleiades comes by with her case-encrusted bass.

"Guess so. Elephants don't have hair." On she goes without a second thought. The hood ornament ignores them both, red eyes staring straight to the horizon, trunk held high.

The truck pulls a flatbed trailer, open, not empty. The first half is piled high with hay bales, stacked and strapped. Ginger follows his friends, places his cymbal up beside Marlin's guitar case. Everyone troops back inside. On his way Ginger glances up at the cab in time to leave a rapidly fading red eye print on his own retinas. A white tuft of hair half covers the eye, like snow upon lava. Better to think about loading, he tells himself, and that's what they do.

Warm summer breeze, smelling of truck exhaust and grass, combs their hair as the truck rumbles forward. Slow going, they join the herd on the highway,

black and red trucks trundling everywhere. Here and there a lost semi, a timid Ford, or a shivering Chevy, but mostly big red and black trucks.

"It sounds different." Ginger turns to Pleiades, sitting cross-legged like a grooving Buddha on a hay bale. "Can't you hear it? River Flats doesn't sound the same any more."

Pleiades cocks her head and eyes close. "All I hear is the trucks."

"Sounds like the same old city to me." Marlin strokes his guitar case. "I should know, lived here all my life."

Ginger shakes his head and hugs his knees to hide the shivers. Half a semester ago, maybe even last week, River Flats beat with mid-Texas town rhythms. Traffic moved to the cadence of the times, pedestrians clip-clopped a cultural counterpoint. Syncopated workmen hammered, dropped boxes, accompanied by crisp carriage return harmonies from office secretaries.

Now the rhythm is gone, buried beneath the ever changing growls of too-slow trucks. Wind hisses through a billion bales of hay, whistling clumps and tufts through the air, coating the road shoulders in golden brown strands. He looks up at the overpass. The green and silver highway sign is painted over in red and black.

"Welcome to New Beringia?" He points past Marlin's nose. "Where's New Beringia?"

"Who cares?" Marlin turns the collar up on his leather jacket.

"They changed the name of the town." Pleiades shrugs. "Don't you guys ever read the papers? River Flats is New Beringia. It's a tourist thing."

The truck rolls up to a massive red-brick barn with a black sign proclaiming: "New Beringia National Guard Armoury." No one gets out so Ginger jumps down, grabs his bass drum and starts inside. Marlin and Pleiades, loaded with equipment, follow.

"Some armoury," Ginger mutters, gazing into the single huge room. No guns no glory, no tanks no trucks. Hay, bundles and baled, stacked or just piled, half fills the room.

"Where the hell we 'sposed to set up?" Marlin sort of laughs, obviously surprised.

"Over there." Pleiades leads the way to a stage made of hay. Tight bales form a floor almost six feet up, baled stairs at the centre.

"Maybe they're planning a hay ride?" Ginger climbs up and finds a place for his drum. They set up in silence, searching for the lurking electrical outlets with only an occasional sneeze.

Marlin rings out a massive E-chord that would have made Hendrix proud. Pleiades lays down a deep growling riff. Ginger snaps a foot-stomping four-four and they burn their way into Mellencamp's old "R-O-C-K in the USA".

Next comes Zep's "Whole Lotta Love", then some Sisters of Mercy and Pearl Jam. Ginger grips the beat with both hands and feet. He's dead on, the back of his neck tingling with high-gear sound. Eyes slamming closed, he feels it, really lets the music into his bones. The moment swallows him up, phosphene trucks beam their way behind his eyelids, their engines roaring like choppy hurricane surf. He drum-rolls with the flow, surging cymbals on the cresting up-beats, pulsing at great waves of blowing grass.

Closer now, bomp debomp, than he's ever been before. The armoury shakes down in its red brick bones, echoing an answer. Outside, New Beringia reverberates a throbbing deep-down harmony. A hand grips his shoulder, precisely halfway between the up and down beats.

"Come on, man, cut it out!" Marlin shrieks.

"Get a grip, Ginger." Pleiades appears at his side. "Stop it."

Drumsticks fall from Ginger's hands. Trucks blink away as he shakes the pulse from his head. Guilt stalks him like a store detective after a ten year old cigarette thief. Marlin slams his guitar down on a hay bale, a shriek of feedback dying into a muffled hum. He paces like a tiger in front of Ginger's drums.

"Man, there was the big band beat of the forties, and bebop after that." He glares at Ginger with black-eyed hatred. "The King whomped the world with Hound Dog in the fifties, begetting the Beatles and their Liverpool beat. Ted Nugent put a Stranglehold on our minds in the seventies. The eighties brought Punk and even Techno, all ram-a-tamming down in four four time."

"Just like Bach back in the Baroque," Pleiades adds, arms folded around her bass, "or even John Philip Sousa in the twenties." She looks at Marlin and giggles. "Where are we going with this?"

Marlin jerks to a halt and stares at her. Anger deflates from his shoulders. His stiff back starts to sag and he grins. "What I'm saying is that each time period has its own sound formed by its own reality." He leans forward on Ginger's drums, hands tap-a-tapping the rim of the snare. "You got any idea where your reality is? Are we even in the same decade, the same century? Ginger, my man, are you even hanging in the same frigging millennium as the rest of us?"

"Did it again," Ginger sighs. "I'm sorry, guys. I didn't even realize."

"I can't play with it." Marlin straightens, hands spreading. "Whatever it is, it's not music to me."

"Sounds old." Pleiades nods. "Almost I can do it, but it seems ancient, like before civilization."

"Sounds like the city to me." Ginger stands, backing away from the drums like they were a desecrated altar. "Not River Flats, New Beringia." His friends look at each other, nodding agreement in their own four four time. Ginger shivers, arms wrapping around themselves, feeling a draft roaming through the hay that leaves frost on his bones.

"Let's get supper before the gig," Pleiades says at last. "There's a diner across the street." Everyone shuts down, glowing telltale amp lights wink off like dissolving stars.

On their way to the diner they pass the red and black truck, itself shut down. The whole left side of the vehicle is gull-winged open. Ginger peers in. No seats, no steering wheel, nothing he can recognize. The truck's floor is matted down with hay, yellow and brown, covered with a few flowing strands of extra-long white hair.

It's dark when they leave the diner, though the sun is still up. Ginger stares at the red-dyed sky, blown waves of dust fuming great dark sheets from a volcanic notebook. Neither Pleiades nor Marlin seem to notice. Back in the armoury,

in a tiny foyer, fluorescents burn like glowing ice. A display case blocks their path with black and red shelves; funny how he hadn't noticed it before.

"We were here first," he reads from a bronze plaque centred above shel-lac-brown bones.

"Come on now, man." Marlin's feet keep the four four beat.

"Now is the time." Pleiades marches past.

Ginger looks down at the crinkled bones. All from a mammoth, he realizes. Little square white tags illuminate their information. The case is open, no glass, no locks. He picks up a funny crinkled oblong shape, white tag sticking to his fingers, insisting it's a mammoth tooth from the late Pleistocene. Fingers trace time-encrusted grooves covering the flat surface with a thousand S-shaped labyrinths.

It feels familiar—too familiar to part with and no one's looking. Ginger slips it into his pocket and follows the others into the dark. Red lights glare at the stage, turning his drums black. Vast three-d shadows move around them, heat radiating over his skin like a fevered flush. Whispers rustle with quiet movements. The armory barn is full of half-seen bulks nearly the size of trucks.

No one speaks but Pleiades whistles in the dark, hands jammed in pockets, until they reach the stage. Marlin grabs up his guitar, holding it like a crucifix before him. Ginger gladly hides behind his drums.

"Play something," Pleiades whispers. "Play anything."

Clack, clack, clack, clack, Ginger starts them off on the right foot. Marlin rings out the opening riff of an old Bob Seger song and they go.

"Just take those old records off the shelf!" Pleiades shouts.

White shadows begin to shake, diffuse, indistinguishable in the darkness like living walls of fog. Ginger finds the perfect rhythm on Soundgarden's "Spoonman", blending the four four with rapid fire up-beat echoes. They shake rattle and roll through the set, barely pausing between songs, never settling for a silent second.

Ginger's feet feel the pulse of the dancers, even through the hay. The building throbs and it slips inside him. Very bomp de bomp, definitely not four four time. It slides into his arms and fingers before finding its way to his eyes.

Mid-beat blinks like strobe-light visions. Off to his left, red eyes Morse-blink back. The eyes brighten as the beat quickens, flashing on swirling white hair. A long trunk shaky-snakes though the air, a single drumstick clutched in its almost-a-hand tip.

"Great Balls of Fire," he hisses, staring at a living flashback from ten thousand years ago. He's rocking with a mammoth, trunk lashing, four feet stomping, hammering the pulse into him with exploding mind words.

"Bomp diddy bomp." Its tusks glow red. "Listen up, son of man."

"I hear bomp bomp you." Ginger bangs back, the pulse flowing like an undammed river through body and soul.

"We're here to stay." Bomp bomp. "Here to live again, feeding in the sun."

"Like the old days?" Ginger's cymbals question. "When glaciers grew and volcanoes spewed?"

And your daddy's daddy's daddies made spears and threw?" The mammoth rat-a-tats, stick clattering on its tusks. "Not now. Times change, ours moves faster than yours. My kind does the hunting. Got more than just trucks coming through." Cymbal crash dripping white-noise tears.

"You don't sound too happy about it." Ginger riffs back, echoing the clatter with rapid fire rolls on the snare rim. "You're winning the war and we haven't even caught on."

"War's bad for music." Red eyes slash. "That's what ties me and you together, harmonic bro. The Glory Herd descends into four four madness, sinking to your savage ways. They march to the beat of your drummers, your reality. When the two paths converge, annihilation will purge one and all."

"Equalling out, meaning no more music." Ginger hammers out of the tom toms, darkening the beat almost to the pulse.

"Don't let it happen," Mammoth bounces back.

"What can I do?"

"Find the Pleistocene pulse." Thunder rolls over him from the mammoth's drums. "You've almost had it. Find it, make it, break it—into something new."

Ginger loses the beat, heart stopping with herky-jerky fear. Mammoth drums dive into silence. Pleiades' bass chops off its musical head. Only Marlin remains, herky jerky hands stroking the whammy bar, ding-donging feedback in a Mobius loop. His eyes shine red as he stumbles to Ginger.

"I feel it!" Marlin shouts. "Don't stop now, daddeo. I'm just catching on." He shoves the Stratocaster's neck under Ginger's nose. Ginger falls off his stool. Something clumps down and it's the mammoth tooth escaping his pocket. Fingers close on its grooves as they search for his drumsticks. Left hand on the tooth, right hand on a stick, Ginger brings them together making a slack-a-tack-tack magic.

Pulse meets rhythm. Man meets Mammoth. The Pleistocene soundtrack collides with rock and roll, exploding into manic, ever-changing, free-form flowing BEBOP!

Ginger hunkers down howling. At last he's found it, at long last the rhythm breaks out. Marlin bounces his guitar riffs off wild spinning up-beats. Pleiades growls through her bass like a wounded sabre-tooth cat. Mammoth wraps his tusks around the whole thing, bomp de bomp bomp. Two species, two times, four minds, into one sizzling song.

Lights pulse, red black, white black, blue black. Glaring waves rock through the armoury. Ginger squints in the brightness at the dancing shapes. Mammoths in mohawks, great tusked bulls wearing beads, humans clad in shaggy white capes, all down on the floor in a single mind-meshing groove. The armoury thunders like a giant woofer, shaking the new reality through the city beyond, forging a heady alliance. Mammoths and humans together, so it was and ever shall be.

Ginger slings sweat drops, christening the Pleistocene Bebop Shift. The moment goes on forever as his arms and eyes lock onto a new world order. At last it's out of him, but still inside too. Lost in the moment, his sticks clatter rim shots off living tusks. Lost in the moment, a hairy white trunk thunders against his tom tom. Bomp de bomp diddy bomp bomp!





# LETTERS

**Letters may be edited for length and Canadian spellings substituted for American ones.**

Dear Dale & Sally,

I'm going to start calling you the Big Little Magazine From Canada. I thought issue #1 was good. #2 is exceptional. Although I liked just about every story and poem not to mention the artwork (Dale your artwork definitely sets Transversions apart from other magazines. And I loved John Barrick's illustration) I did have my favourites. Of the poems, I thought "Five Cantos..." by Sandra Kasturi, "In My Nightmare" by Michael Thomas Dillon and "Flesh" by Nancy Bennett were excellent. All contained good imagery. I especially liked Bennett's use of wordplay in "Flesh". Of the stories, it was tough. "The Robber Maiden's Story" and "In a Revision Once I See" were both good stories. "True Love..." was fun. But my favourites were "Steelsong" by Steve Schlich and "The Changeling Variations" by Steve Carper. Both were unique, intense and human and have left a lasting impression. These are the types of stories I search for but seldom find and here I've found two in a single issue! I'm glad I subscribed and elated that my own work will appear in a future issue. Thanks for producing such an entertaining and thought provoking magazine.

**Kurt Newton, Brooklyn, CT**

Hello,

I enjoyed your first issue. Michael Coney's "The Bucca" impressed me a lot. David Nickle's "The Dummy Ward" scared me silly from ever wanting to get into a car again. I liked "Lost in Translation" less (I suspect the novel version would be richer) and I didn't take to the poetry. SF poetry seems like a pretty weird kid to me right now give me time.

Transversions is helping to fill a void. I agree completely with your manifesto about wanting our rockets and our literates, too. When I was in university, I often heard from my profs and other students about real literature versus science fiction and its kin. B.S. If I read you right, magazines such as yours understand there is no shame in going from Tolstoy in the morning to Gibson in the afternoon. The landscape is much richer.

The acknowledgement of our guilty pleasures may be an example of the end of a belief in hierarchies in our society. The old line distinction between high art and low entertainment is blurring. People used to say God was dead. Not so, if current polls about Canadians' belief in spirituality is any indication. It's Plato and all that Greek absolutism that is fading away. This is a long way of saying that as soon as my tax refund arrives, I'll be sending you a cheque for a subscription.

**Barry Link, Kelowna, BC**

*There has always been some confusion between art & entertainment. Think of Mozart's "The Magic Flute" or the way Charles Dickens is perceived now compared to in his own time. - DLS*

Dear Mr. Sproule and Ms. McBride,

I recently discovered *Transversions* in my friendly, neighbourhood sf store, Sci-Fi World (a much, much greater store than the name would suggest), and was extremely impressed. As a writer of short stories and poetry myself, I would be interested in submitting stories to your magazine. **Emily Chung, Thornhill, ON**

*That's what we're all about, Emily. And there's nothing we like better than finding great stories by new writers. We're trying to get Transversions into as many bookstores as possible so that even if you hesitate to spring for a subscriptions, you can check out each issue as it is published. Currently we can be found at: White Dwarf & Neville Books in Vancouver, White Knight in Edmonton, Sentry Box in Calgary, Seven Mountains Books in State College, PA, Sci-Fi World and Bakka in Toronto, Borogrove Books, Griffin Books and Yates News and Book in Victoria. Hopefully this list will be much longer by issue #4. - DLS & Sally*

# TRANSVERSIONS

HERE'S WHAT PEOPLE HAVE BEEN SAYING ABOUT **TRANSVERSIONS** #1:

"This is one nifty little magazine—full of great art; peppered with imagic poetry; and literally littered with fine fiction. In fact, not just fine fiction but great fiction." **Steven Sawicki** "The Skeptic Tank", *Scavenger's Newsletter* 138

"...a nice cross-genre mix of fiction and poetry. Excellent b&w interiors...and a good cover... An impressive debut."  
**Ellen Datlow** *Year's Best Fantasy & Horror* #8

AND **TRANSVERSIONS** #2 HAS RECEIVED SIMILAR PRAISE:

"This Canadian semipro is a far-above-average effort, lovingly produced and presenting the literature of the fantastic in all its divergent forms.

SF/F/H/the surreal--it's all here, often mixed together in quirky or unexpected ways. And a surprisingly high percentage of it is absolutely first-class work... And the artwork? Just as varied in style and tone as the writing. I especially liked the cover... I strongly recommend this issue."

**Jim Lee** "The Skeptic Tank" *Scavenger's Newsletter* 137

## So don't put it off ANY LONGER. **SUBSCRIBE NOW!**

**Issue #1** still available with Jeff Kuipers cover, new work by Michael Coney, Charles de Lint & Sean Stewart. **Issue #2** almost sold out with full colour Ann Del Farrish cover. Stories by Eileen Kernaghan, DF Lewis and Steve Carper. Watch for **issue #4** this winter...with great new work by Lesley Morrison, David Kopaska-Merkel and Sue Storm, Mark Leiren Young, Charles M. Saplak & more. **Send us \$4.95 per copy, \$18.00 for four issues (CAN. OR U.S.)**

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