

# BRIAN W. ALDISS

## The Worm That Flies

In many ways, Brian W. Aldiss was the *enfant terrible* of the late-'50s, exploding into the science fiction world and shaking it up with the ferocious verve and pyrotechnic verbal brilliance of stories like "Poor Little Warrior," "Outside." "The New Father Christmas." "Who Can Replace a Man?," "A Kind of Artistry," and "Old Hundredth," and with the somber beauty and unsettling poetic vision—in the main, of a world where Mankind signally has *not* triumphantly conquered the universe, as the Campbellian dogma of the time insisted that he would—of his classic novels *Starship* and *The Long Afternoon of Earth* (*Non-Stop* and *Hothouse*, respectively, in Britain). All this made him one of the most controversial writers of the day... and, some years later, he'd be one of the most controversial figures of the New Wave era as well, shaking up the SF world of the mid-'60s in an even more dramatic and drastic fashion with the ferociously Joycean "acidhead war" stories that would be melded into *Barefoot in the Head*, with the irreverent *Cryptozoic!*, and with his surrealistic anti-novel *Report on Probability A*.

But Aldiss has never been willing to work any one patch of ground for very long. By 1976, he had worked his way through two controversial British mainstream bestsellers—*The Hand-Reared Boy* and *A Soldier Erect*—and the strange transmuted Gothic of *Frankenstein Unbound*, and gone on to produce a lyrical masterpiece of science-fantasy, *The Malacia Tapestry*, perhaps his best book, and certainly one of the best novels of the '70s. Ahead, in the decade of the '80s, was the monumental accomplishment of his *Helliconia* trilogy—*Helliconia Spring*, *Helliconia Summer* and *Helliconia Winter*—and by the end of that decade only the grumpiest of reactionary critics could deny that Aldiss was one of the true giants of the field, a figure of artistic complexity and amazing vigor, as much on the Cutting Edge in the '90s as he had been in the '50s.

Few SF writers have ever had the imagination, poetic skills and visionary scope to write convincingly about the *really* far future—once you have mentioned Olaf Stapledon, Clark Ashton Smith, Jack Vance, Gene Wolfe, Cordwainer Smith, Michael Moorcock, and M. John Harrison, you have almost exhausted the roster of authors who have handled the theme with any kind of evocativeness or complexity—but Aldiss has almost made a specialty of it. *The Long Afternoon of Earth* remains one of the classic visions of the distant future of Earth, and Aldiss has also handled the theme

with grace and a wealth of poetic imagination in stories like “Old Hundredth” and “Full Sun.” Never more vividly than here, though, as he takes us to a remote and terrible future to unravel the dread mystery of “The Worm That Flies.”

*The Long Afternoon of Earth* won a Hugo Award in 1962. “The Saliva Tree” won a Nebula Award in 1965, and his novel *Starship* won the Prix Jules Verne in 1977. He took another Hugo Award in 1987 for his critical study of science fiction, *Trillion Year Spree*, written with David Wingrove. His other books include *An Island Called Moreau*, *Greybeard*, *Enemies of the System*, *A Rude Awakening*, *Life in the West*, and *Forgotten Life*. His short fiction has been collected in *Space, Time, and Nathaniel*, *Who Can Replace a Man?*, *New Arrivals*, *Old Encounters*, *Galaxies Like Grains of Sand*, and *Seasons in Flight*. His many anthologies include *Space Opera*, *Space Odysseys*, *Evil Earths*, *The Penguin Science Fiction Omnibus*, and, with Harry Harrison, *Decade: the 1940s*, *Decade: the 1950s*, and *Decade: the 1960s*. His latest books are *Dracula Unbound*, a novel, and *Bury My Heart at W. H. Smith’s*, a memoir. He lives with his family in Oxford.

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When the snow began to fall, the traveler was too absorbed in his reveries to notice. He walked slowly, his stiff and elaborate garments, fold over fold, ornament over ornament, standing out from his body like a wizard’s tent.

The road along which he walked had been falling into a great valley, and was increasingly hemmed in by walls of mountain. On several occasions it had seemed that a way out of these huge accumulations of earth matter could not be found, that the geological puzzle was insoluble, the chthonian arrangement of discord irresolvable: And then vale and rumlin created between them a new direction, a surprise, an escape, and the way took fresh heart and plunged recklessly still deeper into the encompassing up-heaval.

The traveler, whose name to his wife was Tapmar and to the rest of the world Argustal, followed this natural harmony in complete paraesthesia, so close was he in spirit to the atmosphere presiding here. So strong was this bond, that the freak snowfall merely heightened his rapport.

Though the hour was only midday, the sky became the intense blue-gray of dusk. The Forces were nesting in the sun again, obscuring its light. Consequently, Argustal was scarcely able to detect when the layered

and fractured bulwark of rock on his left side, the top of which stood unseen perhaps a mile above his head, became patched by artificial means, and he entered the domain of the Tree-men of Or.

As the way made another turn, he saw a wayfarer before him, heading in his direction. It was a great pine, immobile until warmth entered the world again and sap stirred enough in its wooden sinews for it to progress slowly forward once more. He brushed by its green skirts, apologetic but not speaking.

This encounter was sufficient to raise his consciousness above its trance level. His extended mind, which had reached out to embrace the splendid terrestrial discord hereabouts, now shrank to concentrate again on the particularities of his situation, and he saw that he had arrived at Or.

The way bisected itself, unable to choose between two equally unpromising ravines; Argustal saw a group of humans standing statuesque in the left-hand fork. He went toward them, and stood there silent until they should recognize his presence. Behind him, the wet snow crept into his footprints.

These humans were well advanced into the New Form, even as Argustal had been warned they would be. There were five of them standing here, their great brachial extensions bearing some tender brownish foliage, and one of them attenuated to a height of almost twenty feet. The snow lodged in their branches and in their hair.

Argustal waited for a long span of time, until he judged the afternoon to be well advanced, before growing impatient. Putting his hands to his mouth, he shouted fiercely at them, "Ho then, Tree-men of Or, wake you from your arboreal sleep and converse with me. My name is Argustal to the world, and I travel to my home in far Talembil, where the seas run pink with the spring plankton. I need from you a component for my parapatterner, so rustle yourselves and speak, I beg!"

Now the snow had gone; a scorching rain had driven away its traces. The sun shone again, but its disfigured eye never looked down into the bottom of this ravine. One of the humans shook a branch, scattering water drops all around, and made preparation for speech.

This was a small human, no more than ten feet high, and the old primate form which it had begun to abandon, perhaps a couple of million years ago, was still in evidence. Among the gnarls and whorls of its naked flesh, its mouth was discernible; this it opened and said, "We speak to you,

Argustal-to-the-world. You are the first ape-human to fare this way in a great time. Thus you are welcome, although you interrupt our search for new ideas.”

“Have you found any new ideas?” Argustal asked, with his customary boldness. “I heard there were none on all Yzazys.”

“Indeed. But it is better for our senior to tell you of them, if he so judges good.”

It was by no means clear to Argustal whether he wished to hear what the new ideas were, for the Tree-men were known for their deviations into incomprehensibility. But there was a minor furore among the five, as if private winds stirred in their branches, and he settled himself on a boulder, preparing to wait. His own quest was so important that all impediments to its fulfillment seemed negligible.

Hunger overtook him before the senior spoke. He hunted about and caught slow-galloping grubs under logs, and snatched a brace of tiny fish from the stream, and a handful of nuts from a bush that grew by the stream.

Night fell before the senior spoke. As he raspily cleared his gnarled throat, one faded star lit in the sky. That was Hrt, the flaming stone. It and Yzazys’ sun burned alone on the very brink of the cataract of fire that was the universe. All the rest of the night sky in this hemisphere was filled with the unlimited terror of vacancy, a towering nothingness that continued without end or beginning.

Hrt had no worlds attending it. It was the last thing in the universe. And, by the way its light flickered, the denizens of Yzazys knew that it was already infested by the Forces which had swarmed outward from their eyries in the heart of the dying galaxy.

The eye of Hrt winked many times in the empty skull of space before the senior of the Tree-men of Or wound himself up to address Argustal.

Tall and knotty, his vocal chords were clamped within his gnarled body, and he spoke by curving his branches until his finest twigs, set against his mouth, could be blown through to give a slender and whispering version of language. The gesture made him seem curiously like a maiden who spoke with her finger cautiously to her lips.

“Indeed we have a new idea, oh Argustal-to-the-world, though it may be beyond your grasping or our expressing. We have perceived that there

is a dimension called time, and from this we have drawn a deduction.

“We will explain dimensional time simply to you like this. We know that all things have lived so long on Yzazys that their origins are forgotten. What we can remember carries from that lost-in-the-mist thing up to this present moment; it is the time we inhabit, and we are used to thinking of it as all the time there is. But we men of Or have reasoned that this is not so.”

“There must be other past times in the lost distances of time,” said Argustal, “but they are nothing to us because we cannot touch them as we can our own pasts.”

As if this remark had never been, the silvery whisper continued, “As one mountain looks small when viewed from another, so the things that we remember in our past look small from the present. But suppose we moved back to that past to look at this present! We could not see it—yet we know it exists. And from this we reason that there is still more time in the future, although we cannot see it.”

For a long while, the night was allowed to exist in silence, and then Argustal said, “Well, I don’t see that as being very wonderful reasoning. We know that, if the Forces permit, the sun will shine again tomorrow, don’t we?”

The small Tree-man who had first spoken said, “but ‘tomorrow’ is expressional time. We have discovered that tomorrow exists in dimensional time also. It is real already, as real as yesterday.”

*Holy spirits!* thought Argustal to himself, *why did I get myself involved in philosophy?* Aloud he said, “Tell me of the deduction you have drawn from this.”

Again the silence, until the senior drew his branches together and whispered from a bower of twiggy fingers, “We have proved that tomorrow is no surprise. It is as unaltered as today or yesterday, merely another yard of the path of time. But we comprehend that things change, don’t we? You comprehend that, don’t you?”

“Of course. You yourselves are changing, are you not?”

“It is as you say, although we no longer recall what we were before, for that thing is become too small back in time. So: if time is all of the same quality, then it has no change, and thus cannot force change. So: there is another unknown element in the world that forces change!”

Thus in their fragmentary whispers they reintroduced sin into the world.

Because of the darkness, a need for sleep was induced in Argustal. With the senior Tree-man's permission, he climbed up into his branches and remained fast asleep until dawn returned to the fragment of sky above the mountains and filtered down to their retreat. Argustal swung to the ground, removed his outer garments, and performed his customary exercises. Then he spoke to the five beings again, telling them of his parapatterner, and asked for certain stones.

Although it was doubtful whether they understood what he was about, they gave him permission, and he moved round about the area, searching for a necessary stone; his senses blowing into nooks and crannies for it like a breeze.

The ravine was blocked at its far end by a rock fall, but the stream managed to pour through the interstices of the detritus into a yet lower defile. Climbing painfully, Argustal scrambled over the mass of broken rock to find himself in a cold and moist passage, a mere cavity between two great thighs of mountain. Here the light was dim, and the sky could hardly be seen, so far did the rocks overhang on the many shelves of strata overhead. But Argustal scarcely looked up. He followed the stream where it flowed into the rock itself, to vanish forever from human view.

He had been so long at his business, trained himself over so many millennia, that the stones almost spoke to him. And he became more certain than ever that he would find a stone to fit in with his grand design.

It was there. It lay just above the water, the upper part of it polished. When he had prized it out from the surrounding pebbles and gravel, he lifted it and could see that underneath it was slightly jagged, as if a smooth gum grew black teeth. He was surprised, but as he squatted to examine it, he began to see that what was necessary to the design of his parapatterner was precisely some such roughness. At once, the next step of the design revealed itself, and he saw for the first time the whole thing as it would be in its entirety. The vision disturbed and excited him.

He sat where he was, his blunt fingers around the rough-smooth stone, and for some reason he began to think about his wife Pamitar. Warm feelings of love ran through him, so that he smiled to himself and twitched his brows.

By the time he stood up and climbed out of the defile, he knew much about the new stone. His nose-for-stones sniffed it back to times when it was a much larger affair, when it occupied a grand position on a mountain, when it was engulfed in the bowels of the mountain, when it had been cast up and shattered down, when it had been a component of a bed of rock, when that rock had been ooze, when it had been a gentle rain of volcanic sediment, showering through an unbreathable atmosphere and filtering down through warm seas in an early and unknown place.

With tender respect, he tucked the stone away in a large pocket and scrambled back along the way he had come. He made no farewell to the five of Or. They stood mute together, branch-limbs interlocked, dreaming of the dark sin of change.

Now he made haste for home, traveling first through the borderlands of Old Crotheria and then through the region of Tamia, where there was only mud. Legends had it that Tamia had once known fertility, and that speckled fish had swum in streams between forests; but now mud conquered everything, and the few villages were of baked mud, while the roads were dried mud, the sky was the color of mud, and the few mud-colored humans, who chose for their own mud-stained reasons to live here, had scarcely any antlers growing from their shoulders and seemed about to deliquesce into mud. There wasn't a decent stone anywhere about the place. Argustal met a tree called David-by-the-moat-that-dries that was moving into his own home region. Depressed by the everlasting brownness of Tamia he begged a ride from it, and climbed into its branches. It was old and gnarled, its branches and roots equally hunched, and it spoke in grating syllables of its few ambitions.

As he listened, taking pains to recall each syllable while he waited long for the next, Argustal saw that David spoke by much the same means as the people of Or had done, stuffing whistling twigs to an orifice in its trunk; but whereas it seemed that the Tree-men were losing the use of their vocal chords, the man-tree was developing some from the stringy integuments of its fibers, so that it became a nice problem as to which was inspired by which, which copied which, or whether—for both sides seemed so self-absorbed that this also was a possibility—they had come on a mirror-image of perversity independently.

“Motion is the prime beauty,” said David-by-the-moat-that-dries, and took many degrees of the sun across the muddy sky to say it. “Motion is in me. There is no motion in the ground. In the ground there is not motion. All that the ground contains is without motion. The ground lies in quiet and to lie in the ground is not to be. Beauty is not in the ground. Beyond the ground is

the air. Air and ground make all there is and I would be of the ground and air. I was of the ground and of the air but I will be of the air alone. If there is ground, there is another ground. The leaves fly in the air and my longing goes with them but they are only part of me because I am of wood. Oh, Argustal, you know not the pains of wood!”

Argustal did not indeed, for long before this gnarled speech was spent, the moon had risen and the silent muddy night had fallen with Hrt flickering overhead, and he was curled asleep in David’s distorted branches, the stone in his deep pocket.

Twice more he slept, twice more watched their painful progress along the unswept tracks, twice more joined converse with the melancholy tree—and when he woke again, all the heavens were stacked with fleecy clouds that showed blue between, and low hills lay ahead. He jumped down. Grass grew here. Pebbles littered the track. He howled and shouted with pleasure. The mud had gone.

Crying his thanks, he set off across the heath.

“... growth...” said David-by-the-moat-that-dries.

The heath collapsed and gave way to sand, fringed by sharp grass that scythed at Argustal’s skirts as he went by. He plowed across the sand. This was his own country, and he rejoiced, taking his bearing from the occasional cairn that pointed a finger of shade across the sand. Once one of the Forces flew over, so that for a moment of terror the world was plunged in night, thunder growled, and a paltry hundred drops of rain spattered down; then it was already on the far confines of the sun’s domain, plunging away—no matter where!

Few animals, fewer birds, still survived. In the sweet deserts of Outer Talembil, they were especially rare. Yet Argustal passed a bird sitting on a cairn, its hooded eye bleared with a million years of danger. It clattered one wing at sight of him, in tribute to old reflexes, but he respected the hunger in his belly too much to try to dine on sinews and feathers, and the bird appeared to recognize the fact.

He was nearing home. The memory of Pamitar was sharp before him, so that he could follow it like a scent. He passed another of his kind, an old ape wearing a red mask hanging almost to the ground; they barely gave each other a nod of recognition. Soon on the idle skyline he saw the blocks that marked Gornilo, the first town of Talembil.



The ulcerated sun traveled across the sky. Stoically, Argustal traveled across the intervening dunes, and arrived in the shadow of the white blocks of Gornilo.

No one could recollect now—recollection was one of the lost things that many felt privileged to lose—what factors had determined certain features of Gornilo’s architecture. This was an ape-human town, and perhaps in order to construct a memorial to yet more distant and dreadful things, the first inhabitants of the town had made slaves of themselves and of the other creatures that were now no more, and erected these great cubes that now showed signs of weathering, as if they tired at last of swinging their shadows every day about their bases. The ape-humans who lived here were the same ape-humans who had always lived here; they sat as untiringly under their mighty memorial blocks as they had always done—calling now to Argustal as he passed as languidly as one flicks stones across the surface of a lake—but they could recollect no longer if or how they had shifted the blocks across the desert; it might be that that forgetfulness formed an integral part of being as permanent as the granite of the blocks.

Beyond the blocks stood the town. Some of the trees here were visitors, bent on becoming as David-by-the-moat-that-dries was, but most grew in the old way, content with ground and indifferent to motion. They knotted their branches this way and slatted their twigs that way, and humped their trunks the other way, and thus schemed up ingenious and ever-changing homes for the tree-going inhabitants of Gornilo.

At last Argustal came to his home, on the far side of the town.

The name of his home was Cormok. He pawed and patted and licked it first before running lightly up its trunk to the living room.

Pamitar was not there.

He was not surprised at this, hardly even disappointed, so serene was his mood. He walked slowly about the room, sometimes swinging up to the ceiling in order to view it better, licking and sniffing as he went, chasing the after-images of his wife’s presence. Finally, he laughed and fell into the middle of the floor.

“Settle down, boy!” he said.

Sitting where he had dropped, he unloaded his pockets, taking out the five stones he had acquired in his travels and laying them aside from his

other possessions. Still sitting, he disrobed, enjoying doing it inefficiently. Then he climbed into the sand bath.

While Argustal lay there, a great howling wind sprang up, and in a moment the room was plunged into sickly grayness. A prayer went up outside, a prayer flung by the people at the unheeding Forces not to destroy the sun. His lower lip moved in a gesture at once of contentment and contempt; he had forgotten the prayers of Talembil. This was a religious city. Many of the Unclassified congregated here from the waste miles, people or animals whose minds had dragged them aslant from what they were into rococo forms that more exactly defined their inherent qualities, until they resembled forgotten or extinct forms, or forms that had no being till now, and acknowledged no common cause with any other living thing—except in this desire to preserve the festering sunlight from further ruin.

Under the fragrant grains of the bath, submerged all but for head and a knee and hand, Argustal opened wide his perceptions to all that might come: And finally thought only what he had often thought while lying there—for the armories of cerebration had long since been emptied of all new ammunition, whatever the Tree-men of Or might claim—that in such baths, under such an unpredictable wind, the major life forms of Yzazys, men and trees, had probably first come at their impetus to change. But change itself... had there been a much older thing blowing about the world that everyone had forgotten?

For some reason, that question aroused discomfort in him. He felt dimly that there was another side of life than contentment and happiness; all beings felt contentment and happiness; but were those qualities a unity, or were they not perhaps one side only of a—of a shield?

He growled. Start thinking gibberish like that and you ended up human with antlers on your shoulders!

Brushing off the sand, he climbed from the bath, moving more swiftly than he had done in countless time, sliding out of his home, down to the ground, without bothering to put on his clothes.

He knew where to find Pamitar. She would be beyond the town, guarding the parapatternner from the tattered angry beggars of Talembil.

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The cold wind blew, with an occasional slushy thing in it that made a being

blink and wonder about going on. As he strode through the green and swishing heart of Gornilo, treading among the howlers who knelt casually everywhere in rude prayer, Argustal looked up at the sun. It was visible by fragments, torn through tree and cloud. Its face was blotched and pimpled, sometimes obscured altogether for an instant at a time, then blazing forth again. It sparked like a blazing blind eye. A wind seemed to blow from it that blistered the skin and chilled the blood.

So Argustal came to his own patch of land, clear of the green town, out in the stirring desert, and his wife Pamitar, to the rest of the world called Miram. She squatted with her back to the wind, the sharply flying grains of sand cutting about her hairy ankles. A few paces away, one of the beggars pranced among Argustal's stones.

Pamitar stood up slowly, removing the head shawl from her head.

"Tapmar!" she said.

Into his arms he wrapped her, burying his face in her shoulder. They chirped and clucked at each other, so engrossed that they made no note of when the breeze died and the desert lost its motion and the sun's light improved.

When she felt him tense, she held him more loosely. At a hidden signal, he jumped away from her, jumping almost over her shoulder, springing ragingly forth, bowling over the lurking beggar into the sand.

The creature sprawled, two-sided and misshapen, extra arms growing from arms, head like a wolf, back legs bowed like a gorilla, clothed in a hundred textures, yet not unlovely. It laughed as it rolled and called in a high clucking voice, "Three men sprawling under a lilac tree and none to hear the first one say, 'Ere the crops crawl, blows fall,' and the second abed at night with mooncalves, answer me what's the name of the third, feller?"

"Be off with you, you mad old crow!"

And as the old crow ran away, it called out its answer, laughing, "Why Tapmar, for he talks to nowhere!" confusing the words as it tumbled over the dunes and made its escape.

Argustal and Pamitar turned back to each other, vying with the strong sunlight to search out each other's faces, for both had forgotten when they were last together, so long was time, so dim was memory. But there were memories, and as he searched they came back. The flatness of her nose,

the softness of her nostrils, the roundness of her eyes and their brownness, the curve of the rim of her lips: All these, because they were dear, became remembered, thus taking on more than beauty.

They talked gently to each other, all the while looking. And slowly something of that other thing he suspected on the dark side of the shield entered him—for her beloved countenance was not as it had been. Around her eyes, particularly under them, were shadows, and faint lines creased from the sides of her mouth. In her stance too, did not the lines flow more downward than heretofore?

The discomfort growing too great, he was forced to speak to Pamitar of these things, but there was no proper way to express them. She seemed not to understand, unless she understood and did not know it, for her manner grew agitated, so that he soon forwent questioning, and turned to the parapatterner to hide his unease.

It stretched over a mile of sand, and rose several feet into the air. From each of his long expeditions, he brought back no more than five stones, yet there were assembled here many hundreds of thousands of stones, perhaps millions, all painstakingly arranged, so that no being could take in the arrangement from any one position, not even Argustal. Many were supported in the air at various heights by stakes or poles, more lay on the ground, where Pamitar always kept the dust and the wild men from encroaching them; and of these on the ground, some stood isolated, while others lay in profusion, but all in a pattern that was ever apparent only to Argustal—and he feared that it would take him until the next Sunset to have that pattern clear in his head again. Yet already it started to come clearer, and he recalled with wonder the devious and fugal course he had taken, walking down to the ravine of the Tree-men of Or, and knew that he still contained the skill to place the new stones he had brought within the general pattern with reference to that natural harmony—so completing the parapatterner.

And the lines on his wife's face: Would they too have a place within the pattern?

Was there sense in what the crow beggar had cried, that he talked to nowhere? And... and... the terrible and, would nowhere answer him?

Bowed, he took his wife's arm, and scurried back with her to their home high in the leafless tree.

"My Tapmar," she said that evening as they ate a dish of fruit, "it is

good that you come back to Gornilo, for the town sedges up with dreams like an old river bed, and I am afraid.”

At this he was secretly alarmed, for the figure of speech she used seemed to him an apt one for the newly observed lines on her face; so that he asked her what the dreams were in a voice more timid than he meant to use.

Looking at him strangely, she said, “The dreams are as thick as fur, so thick that they congeal my throat to tell you of them. Last night, I dreamed I walked in a landscape that seemed to be clad in fur all around the distant horizons, fur that branched and sprouted and had somber tones of russet and dun and black and a lustrous black-blue. I tried to resolve this strange material into the more familiar shapes of hedges and old distorted trees, but it stayed as it was, and I became... well, I had the word in my dream that I became a *child*.”

Argustal looked aslant over the crowded vegetation of the town and said, “These dreams may not be of Gornilo but of you only, Pamitar. What is *child*?”

“There’s no such thing in reality, to my knowledge, but in the dream the child that was I was small and fresh and in its actions at once nimble and clumsy. It was alien from me, its motions and ideas never mine—and yet it was all familiar to me. I was it, Tapmar, I was that child. And now that I wake, I become sure that I once was such a thing as a *child*.”

He tapped his fingers on his knees, shaking his head and blinking in a sudden anger. “This is your bad secret, Pamitar! I knew you had one the moment I saw you! I read it in your face which has chanted in an evil way! You know you were never anything but Pamitar in all the millions of years of your life, and that *child* must be an evil phantom that possesses you. Perhaps you will now be turned into *child*!”

She cried out and hurled a green fruit into which she had bitten. Deftly, he caught it before it struck him.

They made a provisional peace before settling for sleep. That night, Argustal dreamed that he also was small and vulnerable and hardly able to manage the language; his intentions were like an arrow and his direction clear.

Waking, he sweated and trembled, for he knew that as he had been

*child* in his dream, so he had been *child* once in life. And this went deeper than sickness. When his pained looks directed themselves outside, he saw the night was like shot silk, with a dappled effect of light and shadow in the dark blue dome of the sky, which signified that the Forces were making merry with the sun while it journeyed through Yzazys; and Argustal thought of his journeys across the face of Yzazys, and of his visit to Or, when the Tree-men had whispered of an unknown element that forces change.

“They prepared me for this dream!” he muttered. He knew now that change had worked in his very foundations; once, he had been this thin tiny alien thing called *child*, and his wife had been too, and possibly others. He thought of that little apparition again, with its spindly legs and piping voice; the horror of it chilled his heart; he broke into prolonged groans that all Pamitar’s comforting took a long part of the dark to silence.

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He left her sad and pale. He carried with him the stones he had gathered on his journey, the odd-shaped one from the ravine and the ones he had acquired before that. Holding them tightly to him, Argustal made his way through the town to his spatial arrangement. For so long, it had been his chief preoccupation; today, the long project would come to completion; yet because he could not even say why it had so preoccupied him, his feelings inside lay flat and wretched. Something had got to him and killed contentment.

Inside the prospects of the parapattern, the old beggarly man lay, resting his shaggy head on a blue stone. Argustal was too low in spirit to chase him away.

“As your frame of stones will frame words, the words will come forth stones,” cried the creature.

“I’ll break your bones, old crow!” growled Argustal, but inwardly he wondered at this vile crow’s saying and at what he had said the previous day about Argustal’s talking to nowhere, for Argustal had discussed the purpose of his structure with nobody, not even Pamitar. Indeed, he had not recognized the purpose of the structure himself until two journeys back—or had it been three or four? The pattern had started simply as a pattern (hadn’t it?) and only much later had the obsession become a purpose.

To place the new stones correctly took time. Wherever Argustal walked in his great framework, the old crow followed, sometimes on two legs, sometimes on four. Other personages from the town collected to

stare, but none dared step inside the perimeter of the structure, so that they remained far off, like little stalks growing on the margins of Argustal's mind.

Some stones had to touch, others had to be just apart. He walked and stooped and walked, responding to the great pattern that he now knew contained a universal law. The task wrapped him around in an aesthetic daze similar to the one he had experienced traveling the labyrinthine way down to Or, but with greater intensity.

The spell was broken only when the old crow spoke from a few paces away in a voice level and unlike his usual sing-song. And the old crow said, "I remember you planting the very first of these stones here when you were a child."

Argustal straightened.

Cold took him, though the bilious sun shone bright. He could not find his voice. As he searched for it, his gaze went across to the eyes of the beggar-man, festering in his black forehead.

"You know I was once such a phantom—a child?" he asked.

"We are all phantoms. We were all childs. As there is gravy in our bodies, our hours were once few."

"Old crow... you describe a different world—not ours!"

"Very true, very true. Yet that other world once was ours."

"Oh, not! Not!"

"Speak to your machine about it! Its tongue is of rock and cannot lie like mine."

He picked up a stone and flung it. "That will I do! Now get away from me!"

The stone hit the old man in his ribs. He groaned, painfully and danced and backward, tripped, lay full length in the sand, hopeless and shapeless.

Argustal, was upon him at once.

"Old crow, forgive me! It was fear at my thoughts made me attack

you—and there is a certain sort of horror in your presence!”

“And in your stone-flinging!” muttered the old man, struggling to rise.

“You know of childs! In all the millions of years that I have worked at my design, you have never spoken of this. Why not?”

“Time for all things... and that time now draws to a close, even on Yzazys.”

They stared into each other’s eyes as the old beggar slowly rose, arms and cloak spread in a way that suggested he would either fling himself on Argustal or turn in flight. Argustal did not move. Crouching with his knuckles in the sand, he said, “... even on Yzazys? Why do you say so?”

“You are of Yzazys! We humans are not—if I call myself human. Thousands of thousands of years before you were child, I came from the heart stars with many others. There is no life there now! The rot spreads from the center! The sparks fly from sun to sun! Even to Yzazys, the hour is come. Up the galactic chimneys the footprints drum!” Suddenly he fell to the ground, was up again, and made off in haste, limbs whirling in a way that took from him all resemblance to human kind. He pushed through the line of watchers and was gone.

For a while, Argustal squatted where he was, groping through matters that dissolved as they took shape, only to grow large when he dismissed them. The storm blew through him and distorted him, like the trouble on the face of the sun. When he decided there was nothing for it but to complete the parapattern, still he trembled with the new knowledge: Without being able to understand why, he knew the new knowledge would destroy the old world.

All now was in position, save for the odd-shaped stone from Or, which he carried firm on one shoulder, tucked between ear and hand. For the first time, he realized what a gigantic structure he had wrought. It was a businesslike stroke of insight, no sentiment involved. Argustal was now no more than a bead rolling through the vast interstices around him.

Each stone held its own temporal record as well as its spatial position; each represented different stresses, different epochs, different temperatures, materials, chemicals, molds, intensities. Every stone together represented an anagram of Yzazys, its whole composition and continuity. The last stone was merely a focal point for the whole dynamic, and as Argustal slowly walked between the vibrant arcades, that dynamic



rose to pitch.

He heard it grow. He paused. He shuffled now this way, now that. As he did so, he recognized that there was no one focal position but a myriad, depending on position and direction of the key stone.

Very softly, he said, "... that my fears might be verified..."

And all about him—but softly—came a voice in stone, stuttering before it grew clearer, as if it had long known of words but never practiced them.

"Thou..." Silence, then a flood of sentence.

"Thou thou art, oh, thou art worm thou art sick, rose invisible rose. In the howling storm thou art in the storm. Worm thou art found out, oh, rose thou art sick and found out flies in the night thy bed thy thy crimson life destroy. Oh—oh, rose, thou art sick! The invisible worm, the invisible worm that flies in the night, in the howling storm, has found out—has found out thy bed of crimson joy... and his dark dark secret love, his dark secret love does thy life destroy."

Argustal was already running from that place.

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In Pamitar's arms he could find no comfort now. Though he huddled there, up in the encaging branches, the worm that flies worked in him. Finally, he rolled away from her and said, "Who ever heard so terrible a voice? I cannot speak again with the universe."

"You do not know it was the universe." She tried to tease him. "Why should the universe speak to little Tapmar?"

"The old crow said I spoke to nowhere. Nowhere is the universe—where the sun hides at night—where our memories hide, where our thoughts evaporate. I cannot talk with it. I must hunt out the old crow and talk to him."

"Talk no more, ask no more questions! All you discover brings you misery! Look -you will no longer regard me, your poor wife! You turn your eyes away!"

"If I stare at nothing for all succeeding eons, yet I must find out what

torments us!”

In the center of Gornilo, where many of the Unclassified lived, bare wood twisted up from the ground like fossilized sack, creating caves and shelters and strange limbs on which and in which old pilgrims, otherwise without a home, might perch. Here at nightfall Argustal sought out the beggar.

The old fellow was stretched painfully beside a broken pot, clasping a woven garment across his body. He turned in his small cell, trying to escape, but Argustal had him by the throat and held him still.

“I want your knowledge, old crow!”

“Get it from the religious men—they know more than I!”

It made Argustal pause, but he slackened his grip on the other by only the smallest margin.

“Because I have you, you must speak to me. I know that knowledge is pain, but so is ignorance once one has sensed its presence. Tell me more about child and what they did! Tell me of what you call the heart stars!”

As if in a fever, the old crow rolled about under Argustal’s grip. He brought himself to say, “What I know is so little, so little, like a blade of grass in a field. And like blades of grass are the distant bygone times. Through all those times come the bundles of bodies now on this Earth. Then as now, no new bodies. But once... even before those bygone times... you cannot understand...”

“I understand well enough.”

“You are scientist! Before bygone times was another time, and then... then was child and different things that are not any longer, many animals and birds and smaller things with frail wings unable to carry them over long time...”

“What happened? Why was there change, old crow?”

“Men... scientists... make understanding of the gravity of bodies and turn every person and thing and tree to eternal life. We now continue from that time, a long long time—so long we have forgotten what was then done.”

The smell of him was like an old pie. Argustal asked him, “And why now are no child?”

“Childs are just small adults. We are adults, having become from child. But in that great former time, before scientists were on Yzazys, adults produced child. Animals and trees likewise. But with eternal life, this cannot be—those child-making parts of the body have less life than stone.”

“Don’t talk of stone! So we live forever... you old ragbag, you remember—ah, you remember me as child?”

But the old ragbag was working himself into a kind of fit, pummeling the ground, slobbering at the mouth.

“Seven shades of lilac, even worse I remember myself a child, running like an arrow, air, everywhere fresh rosy air. So I am mad, for I remember!” He began to scream and cry, and the outcasts round about took up the wail in chorus. “We remember, we remember!”—whether they did or not.

Clapping his hand over the beggar’s mouth, Argustal said, “But you were not child on Yzazys—tell me about that!”

Shaking, the other replied, “Earlier I tell you—all humans come from heart stars. Yzazys here is perched on universe’s end! Once were as many worlds as days in eternity, now all burned away as smoke up the chimney. Only this last place was safe.”

“What happened? Why?”

“Nothing happened! Life is life is life—only except that change crept in.”

And what was this but an echo of the words of the Tree-men of Or who, deep in their sinful glade, had muttered of some unknown element that forced change? Argustal crouched with bowed head while the beggarman shuddered beside him, and outside the holy idiots took up his last words in a chant: “Change crept in! Change crept in! Daylight smoked and change crept in! Change crept in!”

Their dreadful howling worked like spears in Argustal’s flank. He had pictures afterward of his panic run through the town, of wall and trunk and ditch and road, but it was all as insubstantial at the time as the pictures afterward. When he finally fell to the ground panting, he was unaware of

where he lay, and everything was nothing to him until the religious howling had died into silence.

Then he saw he lay in the middle of his great structure, his cheek against the Or stone where he had dropped it. And as his attention came to it, the great structure around him answered without his having to speak.

He was at a new focal point. The voice that sounded was new, as cool as the previous one had been choked. It blew over him in a cool wind.

“There is no amaranth on this side of the grave, oh Argustal, no name with whatsoever emphasis of passionate love repeated that is not mute at last. Experiment X gave life for eternity to every living thing in the world, but even eternity is punctuated by release and suffers period. The old life had its childhood and its end, the new had no such logic. It found its own after many millennia, and took its cue from individual minds. What a man was, he became; what a tree, it became.”

Argustal lifted his tired head from its pillow of stone. Again the voice changed pitch and trend, as if in response to his minute gesture.

“The present is a note in music. That note can no longer be sustained. You find what questions you have found, oh Argustal, because the chord, in dropping to a lower key, rouses you from the long dream of crimson joy that was immortality. What you are finding, others also find, and you can none of you be any longer insensible to change. Even immortality must have an end. Life has passed like a long fire through the galaxy. Now it fast burns out even here, the last refuge of man!”

He stood up then, and hurled the Or stone. It flew, fell, rolled... and before it stopped he had awoken a great chorus of universal voice.

All Yzazys roused and a wind blew from the west. As he started again to move, he saw the religious men of the town were on the march, and the great sun-nesting Forces on their midnight wing, and Hrt the flaming stone wheeling over-head, and every majestic object alert as it had never been.

But Argustal walked slowly on his flat simian feet, plodding back to Pamitar. No longer would he be impatient in her arms. There, time would be all too brief.

He knew now the worm that flew and nestled in her cheek, in his cheek, in all things, even in the Tree-men of Or, even in the great impersonal Forces that despoiled the sun, even in the sacred bowels of the

universe to which he had lent a temporary tongue. He knew now that back had come that Majesty that previously gave Life its reason, the Majesty that had been away from the world for so long and yet so brief a respite, the Majesty called Death.

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