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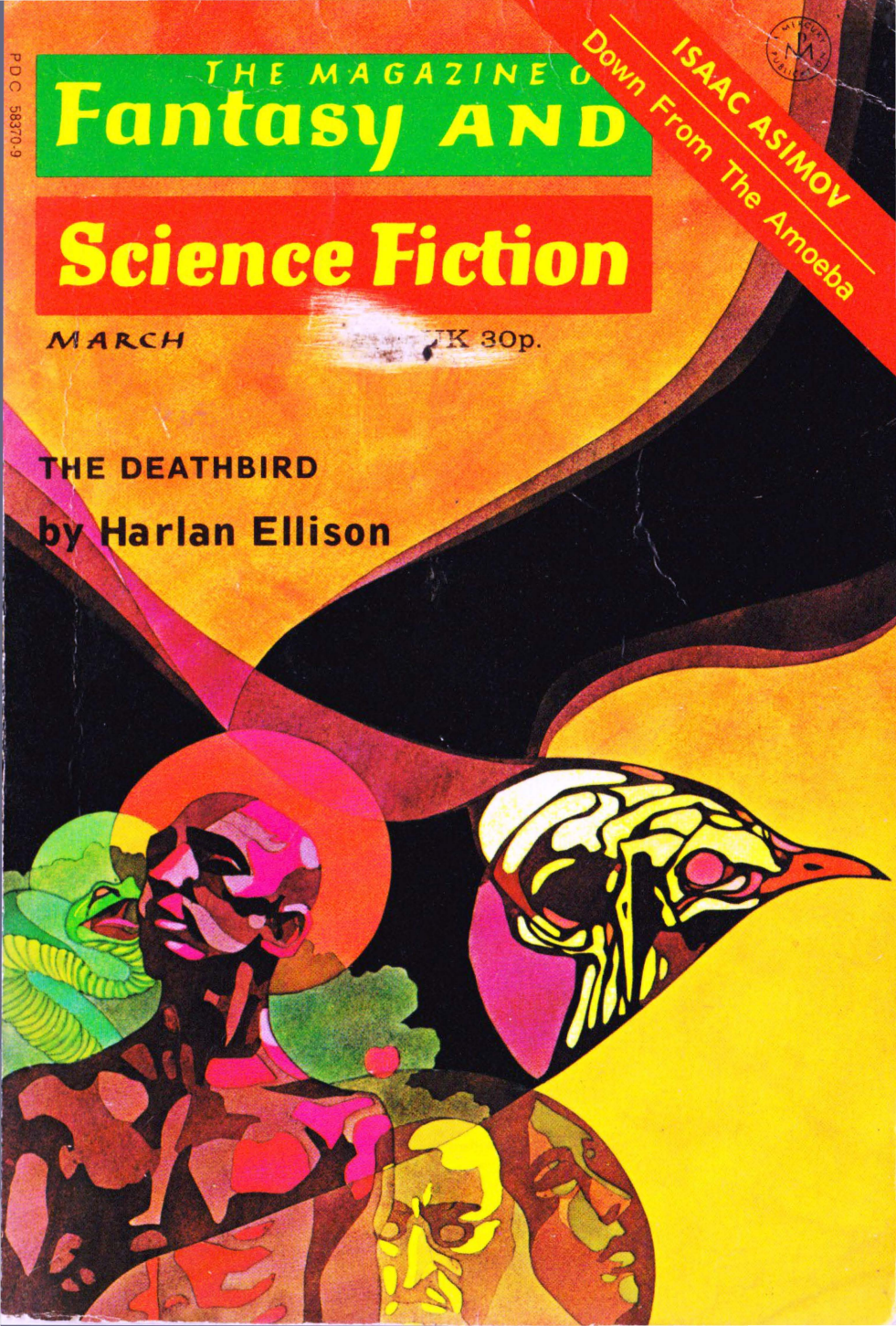
ISAAC ASIMOV
Down From The Amoeba

THE DEATHBIRD
by Harlan Ellison



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FEATURES

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As the author pointed out, there aren't many sf stories built around geological ideas. Here is a good one though, about an unusual project to tame earthquakes by injecting water into the faults. Dean McLaughlin's last story here was "One Hundred Days From Home," (Feb. 1964). He is presently working on a novel and is in the preliminary stages of opening a bookstore in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

The Trouble With Project Slickenside

by DEAN McLAUGHLIN

THE SNIPER'S BULLET panged off the concrete walk and chinked through the chain link fence beyond. Jim Saunders dodged back inside the pump house and banged the steel door shut. For a moment he stood with his shoulder against the cold cinder blocks, waiting for the adrenalin surge to fade from his nerves. He took off his plastic rigger's hat and wiped his forehead. Hot out there.

Something thwucked the styroplastic roof panels; not much doubt what it was. Howard Munroe turned in his seat at the monitor board. "They shooting at us again?"

Saunders put his hat back on, tipped back from his brow. "I don't know about 'they,' but there's a guy up there with a rifle."

Munroe's mouth twisted. "Well, tomorrow it's going to be different. I'll bring my Winchester, and if that guy starts pulling down on us, he'll find out what it's like from the other end of a gunsight."

"Better not," Saunders said.

"Why? We can't just let him go on, making us jump anytime he wants. We. . ."

Saunders turned to let his back settle against the cinder blocks. Something chunked into them from the other side, but he pretended not to notice. "Right now, I don't think he's shooting to hurt anyone. Just scare us. But if we start shooting back, he might get serious."

"You think getting shot at's not serious?"

"Depends," Saunders said. He had his calm back, now. He took the phone off the wall, punched out a number. He had it memorized by now. He listened to the snap of the relays and the ringing at the far end, while with his other ear he heard the slow-paced glotch, glotch, glotch of the pump and the muffled rumble of the diesel that drove it.

Someone answered. "Sheriff's office. San Luis Obispo County. Sergeant Long."

"Jim Saunders here," Saunders said. "Project Slickenside. We're being shot at again. We don't enjoy it."

"Wouldn't care for it myself," Sergeant Long said. "Which site you at this time?"

"Epicenter," Saunders told him. "The one in the middle."

"The one in the middle," Sergeant Long repeated, a low mutter that told Saunders he was writing it down. "All right. We'll get a man out there. You're in that little building?"

"Like a possum up a log," Saunders said.

"Stay inside till he shows up," Sergeant Long instructed. "May take a while. We don't have many cars out your way."

"We'll be waiting," Saunders said. Something whacked against the wall's other side and went on with an acrid snarl. He glanced at his watch and hung up.

The sheriff's deputy arrived twenty minutes later. Saunders heard the growl of the patrol car's engine. He swung the door open a crack and looked out. The deputy had turned the patrol car around so that when he got out it stood between him and the crest of the steep hill that frowned down above the far side of the fault trace. He had a rifle in his hand.

He crouched behind the car's grinning hood, his rifle held half ready. His sun-glassed eyes scanned along the hill crest. The patrol car was an ordinary Chevy, but it had a pair of red dome lights on top and a pair of upward-bent prongs made of angle iron projecting ahead of the bumper like an insect's mandibles. Evidently, he was satisfied with what he saw because he put up his rifle and turned to the enclosure. All the same, he moved fast.

The gate was open. It was always left open when someone was working at Epicenter. The deputy came through and dodged off the concrete walk. He wore a crash helmet and dark pants, and his short-sleeved shirt exposed sun-tanned biceps that bulged like a weight lifter's. In a moment, he was out of sight alongside the pump house.

The diesel grumbled. The pump glotched.

"Saunders?"

Saunders pushed the door open a bit father. "In here."

"How long's it been since he shot last?"

Saunders looked at his watch. "Fifteen minutes."

A grunt, and a quietness while the pump went about its business and the wind fingered a few dry strands of grass that stuck out of the earth on the other side of the walk. "I'd judge he's moved out," the deputy said. "From up there, he could of seen me coming a long way off."

"My guess, too," Saunders said. "But I've sat in a duck blind a few times. It's not the kind of bet I'd care to make, win or lose."

It got a crafty chuckle from the deputy. "Wouldn't of expected a man of your education to think that sharp, professor."

There was something patronizing in that. Saunders scowled. "For your information, the place I first got interested in geology was digging foxholes." It was exaggerating some, but not much. "I liked mine deep and dry."

"Huh," the deputy said. Saunders recognized the voice now. The same man had come once before. "You got a rifle in there?"

"What makes you think I'd have a rifle?"

"You've been shot at . . .how many times now? Three?"

"Five," Saunders said. "This makes six."

"I'd think that's a good reason. Understand, I'm not suggesting. . ."

"Leaving guns at home's another thing I got interested in, digging foxholes," Saunders said. "That guy taking pot shots. . .he's had at least one clean shot at me each time, and he's missed 'em all. And he's kept on shooting after I got under cover. That tell you something?"

"Tells me he doesn't like you much."

"He's trying to scare us off. Make us drop the project," Saunders said. "This project's the end of five years' hard work, and inside of two or three weeks we're going to know if it was worth the effort. We'd be nuts to quit now." He pushed the door open a bit farther, sat down on the sill with his back against the jamb, one foot wedged next to the hinge. "I don't suppose he's got much understanding of that."

"Wouldn't think so," the deputy said. "You want to come out? I could space a few shots along the ridge, in case he's still up there. Make him keep his head down."

"I'm happy right here,"

Saunders said. There in the doorway, he could feel the day's heat breathing against him like the dry radiation of an oven. "It's cool. Want to come in?"

"I'm in the shade," the deputy said. "Not bad." And after a moment. "You're probably right. He doesn't particularly care to hurt anybody, but he'd like you to pack up and leave. Not just you. The whole project."

"That's how I've got it figured," Saunders said. "It's stupid, but it fits."

That nettled the deputy. "Nothing stupid about it. You professors come in like you're poking around, looking for oil or something—those rigs you used to drill your holes looked just like oil rigs—and now it comes out in the papers you've come here to make an earthquake right on top of the biggest earthquake maker in the world. If I wasn't working the job I've got, wouldn't be much surprised at me being up there with that other guy, taking turns at the shooting."

He said it casually enough, but he wasn't exactly joking. Saunders thought carefully before he spoke. "The newspapers probably gave you the wrong impression. What we're trying to do here. . .it's not so much a matter of making an earthquake happen. The San Andreas fault system is going to go on making earthquakes for the next million years. We hope to. . ."

He still wasn't telling it right. He backed off and thought it all the way through. That was the way it had to be explained.

"Earthquakes happen when two chunks of the earth's crust lying next to each other are being forced in opposite directions, and they get caught against each other for a while, and then they let go. It's powerful forces working. You have no idea how powerful. And when they let go, it's sometimes a hard jolt. That's the quake. We're still arguing about what the forces are and how they originate, but we know they're there; no argument about that. Right here, we've got two fault blocks crunched up together, side by side, and the one on the west is being pushed north, or possibly it's the one on the east being pushed south. The result's the same, either way. Maybe it's a little of both."

"If it don't make a difference. . ." the deputy began.

"Right here, right now, it doesn't. But it's one of the things we argue about."

"Don't expect an argument from me," the deputy said. "Not about that." A pause. "Yeah, I think that guy's gone from up there."

Saunders groped to pick up

the explanation where he'd got sidetracked. It was hard to simplify a complicated thing without palming out a lot of misinformation. "Anyway," he said, "the two blocks are grinding against each other, and they're a long way from being smooth. They tend to bind. They get hung up. The friction gets too tight for them to move. When that happens, the force that was moving the fault block that was moving, it builds up until it's strong enough to break the. . .we call it the lock point. Usually, it breaks abruptly, the way you bend a stick until it breaks, and depending on how much pressure was built up, you get either a mild earthquake, or one that isn't so mild. That's all an earthquake is—conflicting forces striking a new state of balance."

"May be all. It's enough," the deputy said.

"Some quakes are so small you don't notice them," Saunders said. "We measure them on a scale. It goes all the way from ones that don't show up except on instruments, all the way to the ones that don't leave one brick on top of another."

"Knock wood, professor."

"And here's something we've discovered. By accident, more or less, but we've checked it out and it's true. If we pump water into a deep well, in a region where there's a fault zone under strain, it tends to stimulate earthquakes. As if putting fluid into the rocks down there lubricates them—makes it easier for them to slide against each other. And we think. . .it's our idea. . .we can release the tensions in the San Andreas fault system by selectively injecting water into the rocks at depth. It means earthquakes. Yes, we admit that. But they'll be milder than they'd be if we waited for them to happen naturally because the strain is being relieved before it's built up to the level where it would happen without our help. We can't prevent earthquakes, but we're hoping to tame them. Make them gentle."

The deputy's voice came around the doorway in a slow drawl. "You talk real smooth, professor. But I'll tell you something. We don't like earthquakes around here. Don't like 'em at all. Any kind. Let me tell you, I've had my share of helping clean up after one of those things. Digging out people that had a brick wall come down on top of 'em—that's not good for the digestion."

Saunders ground his teeth. Either the man hadn't listened, or he wouldn't. "We've developed a technique. We tested it up in Alaska for almost five years, and it worked every time. We're in control from beginning to end."

"That's what the guy says when his car's gone off the road," the deputy said. "Every feeble time. They say they had control."

"And just to be on the safe side, just in case conditions down here are different in some way we don't know about, we selected this particular section of the San Andreas for our first injection, because there aren't many people around. Nobody to get hurt."

"If the gun you're playing with ain't loaded, how come so careful?" the deputy asked.

"No harm done, to play it safe," Saunders said. "Look—here's how careful we're doing it. We didn't drill just one hole; we drilled five."

"That's careful?"

"This one—Epicenter—is the only one we're using for injection. The others—two north of us, and two south—we're pumping water out of them as fast as we can. That's for a reverse process; if putting water into the rocks makes it easier for them to slide against each other, the opposite should work, too. Take the water out, and they'll tend to lock that much more tightly. So there's only a small segment of the fault that can slip. Only a very small segment. Any quake we stimulate is going to be so tiny it won't be noticed except on the seismographs."

"Huh," the deputy said. He didn't sound convinced. "Professor, you talk a smooth line, but I'm just not in the market for insurance this afternoon. Now just a while ago you were talking about how you're fairly sure that guy up on the hill isn't up on the hill any more. The one with the gun. I said you're probably right. But you weren't about to put any bets on that, and I wouldn't say you were dumb not to. But here you're asking all the folks that live around this valley—and there's lots more than you'd think, only they're sort of spread out—and all the people that live any place close to this fault—and there's sure a lot of them—to make a bet just as risky, except you're not even giving 'em a choice."

"The San Andreas is one of the most active faults in the world," Saunders said. "If they're living near it, they've already made their choice. We're just trying to protect them from the consequences. You want to go up the hill and find out if he's gone?"

"Got to, sooner or later. Can't sit in the shade all day."

"Now?"

"Care to come along?" A silent moment. "You don't have to."

"Hold a minute." Saunders turned back to Munroe. "How's it going?"

"Soaking it up like a sponge."

"Any change in back pressure?"

"Gone up a pound or two," Munroe said. "No fluctuations. Very steady."

"What about the dry holes?"

Munroe studied the output graphs. "Nothing significant. Both the Norths and South One running level as church bingo. South Two moved up to thirty gallons for a couple of hours, but it's down again."

"Must have drained a pocket," Saunders decided. South Two was farther from Epicenter than South One, and so it wasn't likely that an increase of water flow from that hole had anything to do with the water being forced down at Epicenter. "How many gallons down so far, today?"

"Twenty-three thousand five hundred, about," Munroe said.

"Shut down at twenty-five," Saunders said. "Even if I'm not back." He went to the door and stepped outside. The sun licked at him like a tongue of fire. "All right," he told the deputy. "Let's go for a walk."

The hill lifted steeply above the fault's trace, and its scarp face was carved by deep ravines that twisted like claws into its substance and gave it the appearance of frowning with pain. Only thin grass grew on the slopes, golden dry now for lack of rain, and only a few small shrubs grew in the clefts.

The deputy carried his rifle the way a hunter would carry it when he expected a pheasant to break cover in front of him. Saunders stayed a full two paces behind. The smell of dust and sun-baked earth flavored the wind. Except for the scuff of their feet, no sounds came.

They emerged at the head of the ravine, far back from the scarp's edge. On its far side, the hill sloped gently down to a broad, empty plain not much different from the one at their backs. Beyond, a crowd of broken mountains gnawed the sky.

They were alone up there, nor was there a place where a man could hide. The deputy glanced at Saunders; Saunders nodded to the right. They went that way. They found the place where the sniper had lain almost at once. His body had flattened the dry grass, and the toes of his boots had scraped small grooves in the dry ground. Motorcycle tracks twisted away down the slope.

The deputy crouched and passed his fingers through the grass near the scarp's edge, but stood up empty handed.

"Smart," he said. "Picked up his cartridges. And if he smoked, he took his butts with him, too."

From where they stood, the San Andreas reached north and south as far as they could see. The trace of it across the barren landscape had the look of an old railroad right of way from which the rails and crossties had been stripped, a seam across the face of the land.

"Not much here," the deputy said. "Might as well go back down."

Saunders nodded. They tramped back to the ravine and went back down.

The maps said New Cuyama was the town nearest Epicenter; so when Project Slickenside was set up, that was where the field office had gone. Never mind how bad the roads were. In that part of California, most of the roads were bad.

Saunders parked his jeep beside the old house that had been taken over for office space. Mary took his briefcase with silence and a smile that said she'd been waiting for it; she had it already open and was scooping out the day's operations records before he'd gone more than a couple of steps down the hall to Riverside's office.

Fred Riverside was the project director. He knew as much about geology as Donald Duck, but he was an expert paper shuffler, and he knew how to talk on a phone to bureaucrat country. He glanced up as Saunders appeared in the doorway and pushed the papers he'd been working on to one side of his blotter.

"I got shot at again," Saunders said. He plunked down on a chair and told what had happened. Riverside's narrow, sallow face was like carved wood as he listened. His chair squeaked under him. He reached for the phone. "This has got to be stopped."

"The guy's not trying to hurt anybody," Saunders said. "Just harassment. You get used to it."

Riverside's hand paused on the phone. "First vandals on our equipment. . .our—what do you call them?"

"Benchmarks."

"Benchmarks. Now this. It must be stopped." He lifted the phone and punched a San Luis Obispo number. "Either we'll get police protection, or I'll ask that some federal marshals be sent in." His attention went to the phone. "Sheriff York, please. This is Fredric Riverside of Project Slickenside. Yes, I'll wait. Thank you."

"It'll stop," Saunders said. "It'll stop when people see we're not doing any harm. They'll start saying we're spending tax money for nothing, because they don't notice we're doing any good."

"Senator Bonforte sent a

letter raising that question just a few days ago," Riverside said. Then the phone took his attention again. "Yes. Thank you. Sheriff York? Fredric Riverside of Project Slickenside. Yes. We. . ."

In the morning, Max Northrup came down from Stanford, and they drove down the valley and up the coast to San Luis Obispo to talk with Sheriff York. Officially, Northrup was a consultant to the project; in actual fact, he was the man in charge where technical matters were concerned. It had been his baby from the start. Saunders took the opportunity to bring him up to date.

Opening his briefcase, Saunders spread papers on the back seat between them. Bumps in the patched highway, the car's tilt as it took a curve, and the surge as the driver burst into a straight stretch of road were distractions, but there'd been more than a few developments in the ten days since their last briefing session. It was not time to be wasted.

For one thing, the radioactive sodium trace that had been put into the water injected during the first week of operations had finally begun to show in the outflow from dry hole North One. The water had penetrated that far. Dry hole South One still was showing only background radiation, not significantly higher than when pumping began.

"That's very slow," Northrup said, pursing his lips. "It was never that slow in Alaska."

"The rock down there's about as porous as a drill instructor's intellect," Saunders said. "Here. . ."

The weekly geosonic profile traverse had been done two days before. Saunders unfolded the display sheets, with their elaborately shaded tracings of rock density, their intricate graphs and tables of data. The crisp print-out paper rattled like sheets of metal foil.

"And here's last week's set," Saunders said, bringing out another folder. Northrup hadn't seen them, either. "The water's getting into the interface zone, all right, and it's spreading out in both directions. But there's not much pore space even there, so it's not going very fast."

Northrup spent a long time studying the geophone records. He leafed through one set, sheet by sheet, then the other. Then he checked them, one against the other. At last he nodded. He looked satisfied, but it was hard to be sure.

"And the seismographs?" he asked.

Saunders passed him the chart and the tabulation of

events. "Nothing significant."

A long silence while Northrup examined the chart. Saunders had spent hours over it, trying to puzzle out whether there had been some pattern to the sequence of the microseisms it recorded. If there'd been one, he'd missed it. Northrup laid the chart down. "Strange," he muttered.

"We knew this was a locked zone," Saunders said. "I've a hunch it's locked tighter than we thought."

"That would be consistent with the data," Northrup said. "What about the grid system? Has it shown any movements?"

The grid system was a series of carefully surveyed benchmarks set in bedrock, several miles back from the fault on either side. The markers included precision mounting studs for a portable laser; if the land on one side of the fault slipped as much as a millimeter relative to the other side, the laser's beam would measure it.

"Four days ago," Saunders said. "Not an angstrom."

"Three months, now," Northrup mused.

"I'm not sure I like it," Saunders said. "I wonder if we might do better to shut down here. Go somewhere else, where it's not locked so tight."

"No," Northrup said. "We shall stay here. This is the least populated area along the fault; so here is the place we must prove our techniques. If we cannot do it here, where else?"

Saunders sat back, dissatisfied but not able to argue. "I suppose." But it made him uneasy to think about it.

Sheriff York was not alone in his office. The other man wore a State Highway Patrol uniform, and York introduced him as Floyd Scudder and said he was the patrol's district commander. York was stocky, round shouldered, and pinched around the eyes. Scudder looked about fifty, but lean and hard except for the bifocals he wore. It was probably a while since he'd written a speeding ticket. He had a bald spot, grey-peppered hair.

"Our workers have been shot at," Riverside told him. "Our equipment has been vandalized. Our office has received telephone threats. We want to know what you can do to stop these incidents. They interfere with our work."

"Might not be able to do anything," Sheriff York said, level eyed. "We're a big county—spread out. And out where you're fooling around, there's not many people. We don't run many patrols out that way."

"Let me remind you," Riverside said, spacing his words. "Our project is sponsor-

ed by the federal government. I would not enjoy having to report that we have been denied police protection despite clear evidence that protection was needed."

Captain Scudder moved in front of York's desk. He perched on a corner so that a leg swung free. "Just hold on, here," he said. "Randy's not saying he won't. He'd like to know what you've got in mind. Some things, a man can do. Others, the Devil himself would have trouble."

"We want it stopped," Riverside said. "All the harassment. Last week, someone with a sledge hammer wrecked one of our. . ." He looked a question at Saunders.

"Benchmark," Saunders supplied. "The one at Wicked Canyon."

"Benchmark," Riverside said. "Ruined a system of. . ."

"Calibrations."

". . .We've been using for a year. A few days ago, one of our pipelines was dynamited. Jim, here—Jim Saunders—just by himself—has been shot at. . .how many times, now?"

"I'm not keeping a careful count," Saunders said. He knew exactly how many times, but a number wasn't going to persuade these men. Diplomacy might. "It's not important. What's important is that a few misguided people are trying to disrupt our work because they don't understand what we're trying to do. We're asking for help. Without it, I don't know if we'll be able to complete the job."

Sheriff York rubbed his jaw. He'd shaved, but dark stubble shaded his features. "Maybe that'd be the best thing. Nobody invited you people. Maybe you should go back to Washington and make 'em an earthquake there."

"The tectonic conditions are different in Washington," Northrup said. "It is here, where the danger of earthquakes is ever present, that our work is important. I suspect your own ideas of our project have been fostered by those preposterous articles in the newspapers."

"I read 'em, if that's what you mean," Sheriff York said.

"Then please understand this," Northrup told him. "That we mean to prevent a major earthquake in this region by stimulating a small one. Perhaps a series of small ones. So small they are of negligible effect. You would prefer that, would you not?"

"We'd prefer none at all," Sheriff York said. Captain Scudder nodded grimly.

"That is beyond our power," Northrup said.

Saunders stood up. "Let's be reasonable. We're asking for

help, but we don't expect miracles. Mostly, I think it's enough if you can do a few things to discourage the people with sledge hammers and guns and so forth. Put a few more patrols out our way. Possibly. . ." He moved his attention to Captain Scudder. "Possibly send one of your traffic control choppers over the valley three times a day."

"Don't know about that," Scudder put in, head bent thoughtfully. "It's a trifle far from the freeway, and that's where we need them. And there's those mountains to get over."

"They're not very high mountains," Saunders pointed out.

Scudder nodded. "Lot of air turbulence, though. I'll see what the pilots think." He studied the top of Sheriff York's desk. "I understand that several times the man who's been doing the shooting has used the hilltop near your main installation. Possibly Randy could be persuaded to station a man up there for a few days."

"We don't know if it's been the same man every time," Saunders said, and saw the flash of delight on Scudder's face—as if the policeman hadn't expected such sharply dichotomized thinking from a geologist.

"The sun's brutal out there, and no shade. Nothing grows more than an inch off the ground. I wouldn't ask a man to sit under that. Not worth it."

"Part of the job," Scudder said, slipping off his corner of the desk. He glanced down at York, who looked as reluctant as a man asked to eat smoked toad.

"It's not necessary," Saunders said, shrugging to indicate a total indifference. The sheriff looked relieved. "You'd do more good. . .this last time, the man that did the shooting used a motorcycle. If you'd—both of you—tell your men to watch for a motorcycle with a rifle aboard, especially out at our end of the country; well, a rifle's a hard thing to hide on a motorcycle."

"No problem there," Sheriff York nodded. He was making notes. "You're close to the county line, out there. I'll ask the neighbors for some cooperation. I'm a few favors up on 'em; might do some good."

"It would also help," Riverside said, "if you would assign a man to each of our installations. I'm sure that in several cases arrests could have been made if you'd had a man on the scene."

"How many places is that?" Sheriff York asked, ball-point poised.

"We have five wells," Riverside said. "We have a small

reservoir in the mountains to the east—the Temblor Range, I believe—and a pipeline leading from it to Epicenter. Then we have twenty seismograph stations, and forty. . ." He turned. "What do you call them, Jim? I can never remember."

"That's enough," Sheriff York said. He laid his ball-point down. "You want all these guarded around the clock—right?"

"Of course," Riverside said. "Something guarded only a few hours a day is not guarded at all."

"You know how many men that's going to take?" York asked. "Figuring eight-hour shifts, that's fifteen men just for the wells. The rest of it, take whatever number of things you've got and multiply by three. Then forget it."

"If you're unwilling to supply the assistance we need, I will be compelled to request help from federal marshals," Riverside said. "Of course, the implication would be that you are not able to keep order in your own territory. But I see no alternative."

"Bring in as many as you want," Sheriff York said. He looked Riverside straight in the eye. "Glad to have 'em. We'll cooperate all we can."

"My office also," Captain Scudder said.

It looked like things would break up then. "One more thing," Saunders said quickly. "We'd prefer the newspapers didn't print anything about us being shot at and so forth. Same thing for all the news outlets. There's enough people making trouble, without giving more of 'em the idea."

Sheriff York shifted in his chair. "Too late for that, I'm afraid," he said. "The local paper got it off our call sheet last night, and the papers from Los Angeles were on the phone this morning. NBC has a television crew on the way, and Associated Press has somebody coming. You've made the big time."

Saunders' jaw tightened. "That does it," he said. "That just about does it."

Aqueduct and siphon systems had been built to bring the water pumped from the dry holes down to Epicenter, where it was put back underground. In the morning, not even a trickle was coming from North One. Saunders went to check up.

It wasn't hard to find out why. Someone had cut through the fence around the well and blasted through the wall of the pump house. Inside, a sledge hammer or its equivalent had been used on the pump and on the diesel that drove it. What was left might have brought a few dollars at a scrap yard, but

otherwise it was good for nothing. A hole had been punched in the diesel's fuel tank—it looked like the bite of an axe—and the floor was inch deep in stinking goo. Saunders wrinkled his nose and backed out. Just luck the mess hadn't caught fire.

The jeep had a two-way radio. It couldn't reach far, but it reached far enough. He raised Epicenter and ordered the injection pump shut down. Then he drove up the long slope to the edge of the Temblors and walked the last half mile up Jackrabbit Canyon to the reservoir. The pipeline's valve was stuck; he had to wrestle with it, and the sweat came out of him like a squeezed sponge before—at last—the wheel began to turn. The dry air snatched the wetness from him—left a thin gummy residue on his arms and back—and he wished he hadn't left his canteen back in the jeep. When he got back there, he drank deeply. For once, he didn't mind its tepidness, nor its taste of metal. It was water.

Max Northrup was at Epicenter when he got back. Emerging from the pump house as Saunders climbed out of the jeep, he moved as if to return inside. Saunders nodded in another direction, and Northrup came outside the fence. Together, they walked down the gentle slope toward the fault line.

"We've got a spare diesel," Saunders told him. "But we'll have to send for a pump. Won't be back in business for a week. Maybe two weeks. I don't know."

"I do not like to suspend injection for so long," Northrup said. He bent and broke off a handful of dry grass. He let the blades scatter to the winds one at a time.

"What would you suggest?" Saunders asked. He didn't see much of an alternative. "Possibly we could inject just enough to maintain the pressure level at the point of injection. I don't like it, though. It's going to seep beyond North One, without the pump working there. A good chance it might come unlocked."

"That is my thought, also," Northrup said. "No. You are right. Until the pump is replaced, we must suspend injection. But I do not like it. It will mean, when we do resume, a second zone of increasing pressure will expand from the injection point, following upon a zone where the pressure was raised and then somewhat relaxed. I am not sure what may result from that. It is not one of the things we tested in Alaska."

Saunders stopped. He plucked a handful of pebbles

from the ground and weighed them in his hand. They were smooth, stream-bottom pebbles; strange things to find in this dry country if you didn't know how they'd got there.

"One thing we might do," he said. "So far, the injection hasn't seeped down as far as South One. So we could borrow the pump from South Two for a few days without too much risk. All it's doing now is guarding South One against natural seepage from the south, and if the output there's been any sign, there's not much of that. If we do that, and then just inject enough to maintain pressure. . .sort of a hold-things-as-they-are operation until we're back to normal. . .how does it sound?"

He glanced back the way they'd come, and he saw the sheriff's department cruiser wheel into the parking area beside the fence. It halted abruptly, and a cloud of dust sifted over it, slowly dissipating in the breeze. "Guess we'd better get back," he said.

They started back up. "It sounds as good as can be done under the circumstances," Northrup said. He sighed. Perhaps it was only that his breath was coming hard, but it wasn't much of a climb. His city shoes scattered sand. "I would prefer it was not necessary."

"You and me both," Saunders said. He took off his plastic hat and wiped sweat from his brow.

The deputy came back from using the radio in his patrol car. His boots crunched the gravel as he approached the ruined mess that had been North One. "Orders are," he said, "don't touch a thing. Same for me as you. It's federal property, so there's an FBI team coming up from smog country. They don't want anybody messing it up before they get here."

The puddled oil still gave its reek. Saunders allowed himself one more glance at the mess and stumped back to the gate. "We'll just have to wait about starting repairs," he told Northrup.

"The sooner repairs are made, the greater our control over conditions," Northrup said. He glared at the deputy who was walking back to his car.

Saunders shrugged. It was out of his control. "At least, we can get the diesel moved out here, ready to put in. And we can start taking the pump out of South Two."

"No, Jim. Not the pump," Northrup said. "I would prefer it was kept there, in service, as long as possible. Perhaps it would make no difference, but we lose very little by being

careful. When we are almost ready to put it in, then is the time to take it out of South Two."

Saunders thought, then nodded. "I suppose," he said. "When you get down to it, I'd rather we didn't have to take it out at all. It's needed here more, but I'd rather it wasn't. Did you find out how long before we'll get the replacement?"

"Fred Riverside said he would let us know as soon as he found out," Northrup said.

"Not much chance of that," Saunders said. The deputy was coming toward them again. Saunders paused expectantly.

"Got another piece of news for you," the deputy said. "Ever hear of somebody called The Guru?"

Saunders and Northrup traded questioning glances.

"Some Los Angeles cult character," the deputy explained. "Seems he's going to pay you a visit up here. Said he would, anyway. Going to put a curse on you, or something."

Northrup made a disgusted sound in his throat. Saunders shook his head. "That's all we need," he said. "We didn't have enough, and now we'll have that to handle, too." He nodded to Northrup. "We'd better get back to the office. We've got a long night ahead."

"The Guru?" The senior member of the FBI team rubbed his eyebrow. "The city's got enough like that to fill an ark. I'll see if the office has a file on him." He reached for the phone.

They were in the New Cuyama field office. The agent—his name was George Farnham—talked on the phone for several minutes, then put a hand over the mouthpiece. "Bring in the files machine," he ordered. Two of the men in dark business suits got up and went out into the thickening dusk. Farnham went back to talking, dictating a report of what they'd found—and hadn't found—at North One.

The two agents returned lugging a heavy piece of equipment. It had a crinkle-finish casing, a few knobs, and a slot like a grinning, toothless mouth. A typewriter was moved off a desk to make room. A cord from the unit was clipped to the phone's wires. Another cord was plugged into the wall. Farnham completed his report and laid the handset down. Photoprint paper began to emerge from the mouth. When the first sheet fell on the desk, he picked it up and began to read.

"Michael Ardmore, alias Whitey Ardmore, alias Valentine Michael Smith, alias The Guru. Six foot three. Umm.

Umm. Huh! An albino. How about that?"

He read on for a while, mumbling most of it, picking out wheat from chaff. It was routine bits of information of the sort interesting to law enforcement officials but nobody else. Boiled down, it said The Guru was a typical tradesman catering to that aimless part of humanity that needed a novelty to put its faith in. Occasionally, like most of his tribe, he sought publicity. "Common as road apples," Farnham said, letting the last page glide down on the desk.

"Then we have nothing to worry about," Riverside inferred.

"Didn't say that," Farnham said. "Depends how much publicity he wants, this time."

Television and radio carried progress reports on The Guru's procession. He was coming on foot in the company of his flock, and they were coming very slow. Saunders caught glimpses on the tube in the evening, but his days were too full of work for it to take more than a fragment of his attention. Cleaning up the mess at North One took time, and Northrup had decided that—while North One was out of action—geosonic profiles should be taken daily along that section of the fault. The days were long. The sun baked him spitless with its blaze. The Guru was a problem, now, for the squad of federal marshals who had—at last—shown up. Saunders had enough other things on his mind.

His jeep bumped down the rough track from the Caliente Mountains on the western side of the valley. The windscreen had acquired a bullet hole through which the breeze shrieked; there hadn't been time to have it replaced. There were also bullet nicks in the fenders and a long scratch across the engine hood. Behind the driver's seat, the canisters of seismograph tapes rattled like dice in a cup. The road curved around a line of low hills bordering the fault trace, and as Epicenter came into view, Saunders involuntarily took his foot off the gas.

It looked like the circus was in town.

They'd parked their cars everywhere. Cars crowded the slope below Epicenter in a mob, like a horde of beetles, their backs gleaming bright in the sun. A few crouched, canted, on the road's high shoulders. More had been driven all the way off the road and stood where they'd stopped like boats thrown ashore by a tidal wave. The people were so small with distance that they looked like nothing so much as a weed

garden grown overnight, clustered before Epicenter's enclosure. There were a lot of them.

The track he'd been following angled down and joined the road. The road began the long, gentle slope upward. Saunders followed it as far as he could, squeezing through the narrows where parked cars on either side made bottlenecks, until the jutting corner of a Kamakazi's sleek rump combined with the ragged fender of a rust-nibbled Hupmobile to block his way. No one was there to move the machines, and their keys were gone. Saunders left the jeep in the middle of the road and walked the rest of the way.

They weren't a packed crowd, he discovered. More like a football crowd at half time, with nothing to focus their attention. There were all kinds of cars, Cadillacs to Datsuns. People sat on bumpers and fenders, or on the ledges of open doors. Two barefoot girls in not very adequate bikini pants danced go-go style to the raspy, hammering beat of a half dozen transistor radios and the rhythmic clapping of a large male audience. A foresighted entrepreneur had got there early with a carnival concession trailer; sweat glistened on his face and arms as he dispensed soft drinks, hot dogs, and coffee. The sizzle and the scent of hamburgers made the air delicious to breathe, reminding Saunders it had been a long time since breakfast. Empty cups, cans, and paper wrappers littered the ground.

Up close to the fence, off to one side, Saudners noticed the boxlike hugeness of a television van. Cables snaked out of its back, and an antenna on the roof was aimed skyward toward a relay chopper that hung gnatlike against the blue sky far to southward. Voices everywhere made a deep mumbling gabble, punctuated by the shrieks of children as they scrambled over the hillside on their restless errands.

The parking area at the gate had been cordoned off with a rope strung around a series of sawhorses. It wouldn't have made the crowd hesitate if they wanted to get past it, but mostly their attention was in other directions. Nothing was happening. Max Northrup's old Mercedes stood near the gate beside the minibus used by the operating staff. In addition there was the long black car the marshals had come in, and three police cars—two from the sheriff's department and one from the road patrol. The marshals and the officers stood not far from their machines. Some talked together in a cluster; a few watched the

crowd. They had pellet guns, and gas grenades hung from their belts. Their helmets had plastic face shields tilted up out of the way. Saunders stepped over the rope, and one of the sheriff's men moved to intercept him. One of the dark-suited men turned from the circle of talk and spoke a word. The deputy abruptly lost interest.

Saunders approached the group. "What's going on?"

Marshal Zim—he was the senior man—looked him up and down. It made him feel dusty. "You don't know? It's The Guru. He'll get here anytime."

Saunders never had got Zim's first name. One of the other marshals lifted a pair of binoculars. "Yeah. There he is. Give 'em a half, three quarters of an hour."

With his bare eyes, Saunders tried to see what the marshal had seen. From where he stood, the road was visible for miles, and there were more than a few cars on it, each raising a dust cloud behind it. "I don't. . ."

The marshal passed him the glasses. It took a moment to adjust to them—the sunlight dazzled—and a moment longer to find the road and search along its length. For a long time he saw nothing, but then, through the dust of a car that jolted visibly in the ruts and washboards but pounded stubbornly forward, he glimpsed the foot party tramping along the shoulder like a safari on the veldt. He tried to sort out individuals, but even with the glasses the distance was too great. It was just a gaggle of people. He gave up the glasses.

"And we've got a problem," Zim said. He backed toward the fence, beckoning Saunders to follow. Puzzled, Saunders went. Zim turned his back to the crowd.

"We got word about twenty minutes ago," he said quietly. "They had a quake in Owens Valley."

It didn't make sense. "That's across the Sierras," Saunders said. "What's that got to do with us?"

Zim glanced over his shoulder at the crowd. "They don't know about it yet, but we figure there's something like three or four hundred radios out there. Won't take 'em long. When they do. . ."

He seemed to think he'd said enough—that the rest was obvious. "Owens Valley is a hundred miles away," Saunders said. "It's a known earthquake zone, and it's a different fault system entirely. It hasn't anything to do with what we're doing here."

"Maybe so," Zim said with a means-nothing shrug. "Think you can explain it to 'em? Make 'em understand?"

Frowning, Saunders looked again at the people on the other side of the rope. He hadn't paid much attention before; it was only a crowd. Now he saw the way faces looked back at him, first one, then another; all of them feral. He saw the way one lean, dark-bearded man picked stones out of the hard dry earth and weighed them in his hands and discarded the small ones. The ones that were satisfactory went into the hip pockets of his jeans. The pockets bulged.

Saunders' glance moved on. A small squad clad in vaguely Arabic costumes paraded back and forth with picket signs aloft. SAN ANDREAS FAULT, NOT OURS, one declared. Another said, DISTURB THE SLEEP OF MOTHER EARTH AND SHE WILL SPANK. Behind them, a paisley-painted microbus carried a banner: PLEASE DO NOT PLAY WITH THE DRAGON'S TAIL.

"Those people out there," Zim said close to his ear, "mostly they came to watch this Guru character jingle his tambourines or whatever he does. It's a weekend, and it's summer, and it's fun for the whole family. It's cheaper than Disneyland. But deep inside their skins, they're scared of quakes—can't say I blame 'em. I've seen a good-sized building come down like it was made out of cards, and you feel a thing like that in your blood for quite a while after. If they get word about that one in Owens Valley and if that Guru clown points at us and says kill, likely they'll do their best to pound us into the ground. They'd like somebody to tell 'em, because without it they wouldn't have the nerve or the brains to think of it themselves. And our best guess is, if that Guru's on the scene when the radios start blatting, that's what he'll do. We're trying to get the bulletins sat on, but I don't expect much good to come of it, freedom of the press being what it is."

It was two or three complicated ideas to put together, but Saunders wasn't without practice in that line of work, even if the data didn't remotely concern itself with the science he'd done his post-graduate work in.

"I see what you mean," he said.

"Glad somebody does," Zim said. His attention caught by the weight of Zim's irony, Saunders turned to him and waited for the explanation.

It came, with a thumb tilted toward the enclosure. "Told the guy in charge here the same thing. Know what he said?"

"I've a good guess," Saunders said.

"Said they're wrong if they think that way, so it's nothing to worry about."

Saunders nodded. It was the way Northrup would think.

"We see it this way," Zim went on. "We don't have the manpower or the equipment to stop those people if they decide they want to wreck things here. We'd only get hurt, and so would some of them."

"Makes sense," Saunders said.

"So our basic plan, if they start coming, we'll shoot off our pellet guns—aim low, to bark 'em on the shins—and we'll toss a few skunk grenades. If they don't stop—they might, but I think they'll keep coming—we'll fade around the fence corners and let'em have their fun. Not much we can do about it."

Saunders nodded. There wasn't much to find fault with. He didn't like to think about Epicenter being pounded to rubble, but the only alternative he could expect was a half dozen bodies trampled into the hard ground and Epicenter wrecked anyway.

"Just one trouble," Zim said. "We don't want any people inside the fence if the crowd starts going over it. They'd get walked on, and they wouldn't look too good, after."

"And he won't move?"

"Right," Zim said.

Saunders glanced back at the crowd again. They didn't look dangerous, but they didn't know everything he knew. And somewhere, about the same time he'd been practicing the fine art of foxhole digging, he'd developed a keen respect for the damage a crowd of bare-handed humans could do.

He moved toward the gate. "I'll talk to him," he said.

"Hoped you would," Zim nodded.

Max Northrup was talking to one of the TV men in front of a camera. A corner of the pump house was behind them, and so the camera had a view of Epicenter's physical presence and also a glimpse of the crowd's fringe. Northrup was speaking as Saunders approached.

"That is the same argument that has been used against blood transfusions, penicillin, and kidney transplants," Northrup was saying. "Also nuclear energy, powered flight, and—I would suppose—building fires at the mouth of a cave to keep wild animals out." He noticed Saunders and beckoned him over.

"This is my assistant, Jim Saunders," he said. "Mr. Pinero here was asking what results we have obtained so far, and. . ."

Saunders looked at the camera. It was on wheels, and the wheels rested on wide plywood boards that had been laid down. Cables from it were

draped over the fence; they wriggled back toward the big van. The camera's red light glared like an insect's eye.

"If you don't mind," he said, "something's come up that we'd better talk about." It was no time to get bogged down in a television interview. He nodded to Pinero. "I hope you don't mind."

Pinero did mind, but he gestured out to the cameraman. "Not at all," he said, and stalked away.

Saunders and Northrup strolled around the side of the pump house.

"There's going to be trouble," Saunders said. "That crowd. . .when they hear about Owens Valley. . .I'd rather play catch with hand grenades."

"There will be no trouble," Northrup said. "It is idiotic. Silly." He waved his hands.

"Silly, yes," Saunders said. He nodded at the crowd on the other side of the fence. "The trouble is, they don't know it's silly."

Northrup looked at the crowd but spoke with calm indifference. "I think you are overdramatizing, Jim. They are harmless. They have come to watch this foolish Guru perform. He will perform, and they will go about their business. That is all."

"But when they hear. . ."

"An earthquake hundreds of miles away? Don't be ridiculous."

"I'm not being ridiculous," Saunders said steadily. "Put yourself in their shoes and pretend you don't know any more about earthquake mechanisms than a worm." He grabbed a handful of air. "Some of 'em probably don't know where Owens Valley is."

"I would agree with that," Northrup said.

"All right. They know we came here to make an earthquake. A small one, but they don't make that distinction. A quake's a quake—the way they think about it. And now they've had a quake—maybe not here, but that's another distinction I don't think they'll make. It's always nice to have something to blame, even if they're not the ones that got hurt. And they'll want to make sure we don't cause any more quakes."

"But we did not cause the one that has happened!"

"I don't think they'll wait for you to explain that," Saunders said. "Or anything else. I don't know what's going to happen—it'll depend a lot on the way things break. And this Guru character, it'll depend on what he wants to do. But if we've got any sense, the smartest thing we can do is stand out of their way and let 'em do what they want without

trying to stop 'em, or telling 'em how dumb they are."

"Let them destroy everything we are doing here?" Northrup demanded. "But it is for them we are doing it!"

Saunders shrugged. You never got medals for telling the troops to keep their heads down. "Can't be helped. Anyway, there's a limit to what they can do. They can make a mess of the pump and the monitor instruments and so forth. They're not cheap, but if we have to replace 'em, it's not hard. The only thing we'd have a hard time to replace is the well, but that's one thing they can't wreck. Not easily."

"Are you suggesting. . .?" Northrup began.

"I'm saying, if we're smart, we'll stand aside and let 'em do what they'll do anyway, whether we tried to stop 'em or not. They've got us outnumbered."

Northrup turned to look out through the fence. A phalanx of motorcyclists came roaring up the hill in black jackets and with devil horns on their helmets. They halted *en tableau* astraddle their machines. Through their faceplates, Saunders glimpsed beards and gleeful, smiling teeth.

"Do you really believe they would. . ?" Northrup asked.

"If they find out about the quake and if that Guru character tells 'em to smash us, that's what they'll do."

A long quiet sigh. "Jim, where did you learn so much about people?"

"I made corporal in the army," Saunders said. "And I taught undergraduates for six years."

The Guru arrived. He rode in a sedan chair, and his troupe walked. Four of them supported the chair on their shoulders. They were a ragged lot. The men, mostly youthful and scraggle-bearded, were most of them bare to the waist and deeply tanned by the sun. Their levis were threadbare and frayed. The women wore loose, shapeless dresses and straight, long hair. Inside the dresses, some of them were rather shapeless, themselves.

Likewise their minds, Saunders thought, as he stood and watched. He'd been watching with a growing uneasiness. It was one thing to know that The Guru could destroy Epicenter. It was something else to stand out of the way and let it happen.

"Have any loudspeaker equipment?" he asked Zim.

"Got a bull horn. That do?"

"Might."

Zim went over to the black car. He opened the trunk and came back with the bull horn. It had a pistol grip, a battery

pack, and a mouth like a flash bulb reflector. "What you planning?"

"I'm not sure," Saunders admitted. It was just a feeling.

Zim looked at him carefully. "Play it by ear, huh?" He put the bull horn in Saunders' hands.

"Play it by ear," Saunders nodded.

The Guru's procession came on. An acolyte in a voluminous robe led the way. He carried a small gong which he thunked with a mallet. It sounded roughly as musical as the lid of a garbage can. As they came up the hill, the troupe uttered a guttural, rhythmic, march-timed chant. The crowd opened a path.

The Guru's dust-smudged turban made his head look big, and he rode slouched heavily in his chair. His eyes were concealed behing glittery-surfaced sunglasses. A loincloth was all he wore. His body was smeared with a grey substance that gave him an appallingly cadaverous look.

"Dung and ashes," Zim muttered. "Better 'n sun tan lotion. Heavy on the ashes, light on the dung."

Following the sedan chair, two men shared the weight of a black-lacquered chest slung between them on a pair of long poles. Yin-Yang designs in red and gold embellished its panels. The remainder of the troupe straggled behind, chanting as they came.

A knife blade flashed and a section of the rope cordon fell. The Guru's people strode out on the forbidden ground. Saunders sensed a movement near him as the sheriff's deputies started to advance, but Zim gave them a hand sign and they paused. The sedan chair was set down. The Guru stood up, a scrawny, long-limbed creature gawky as a stork. Saunders took a breath and lifted the bull horn.

"You there. Who are you? What do you want?" His voice made echoes, startling him.

The creature stood still. The men with the black chest were moving past him, and he signed for them to pause.

"I come to beseech the gods. To intercede. To ask them to hold back the havoc that is sure to come because you interfere with the forces of the world."

He spoke in a reedy, hollow-sounding voice. An amplified voice, with things done to its tone by electronic modification. The black chest, Saunders decided, must contain some very sophisticated equipment.

The bull horn had a thumb button. "If that's all you're here for," Saunders said, "we won't try to stop you. But you're making a mistake. We've

got things balanced very delicately here. You could upset them with a breath. I'm warning you, if you disturb things, you'll be responsible for anything that happens."

"The gods are the source of all power," The Guru replied with stiff dignity. "It is their peace that your meddling disturbs, and to whom I shall speak. I do not ask your permission. Permission is not yours to give."

"You've been warned," Saunders said. He lowered the bull horn. After a moment, The Guru signed for the men with the chest to proceed.

Zim moved close to Saunders' shoulder. "Nice try," he said. "Didn't get much, though."

"Not much," Saunders admitted with a nod. His eyes still watched The Guru. "Confused things some. When the news gets here, some of those people won't be sure it's our fault."

It prompted a crafty smile. But then Zim had second thoughts. "Taking a chance, though. If they hear about it before he's done his act, what then?"

"They can't do any more than wreck the place," Saunders said. "It's worth a try. And..." He looked down at the bull horn. "I'll keep this."

The chest had been set down on the gravel, and The Guru had got down cross-legged in front of it, his back to the crowd. He'd arranged half a dozen black lumps—they looked like small bricks of charcoal—on top of the chest. His followers had resumed their march-rhythm chant.

Now The Guru produced a Zippo lighter from his loincloth. Very carefully he touched it to each black lump. Threads of grey smoke trailed off in the breeze. Saunders caught a whiff and wrinkled his nose at the cloying odor.

"Incense?"

Zim leaned close. "Keeps the mosquitoes off," he said. "Look. From here on, things can get touchy. Maybe you'd better..."

Saunders took the hint. The television crew had moved their camera out to a corner of the parking area. Their equipment van was behind them, and they had a good view of The Guru's performance. It looked like a safe place; the van stood between them and the crowd, and the crowd had nothing against the television industry. Apparently Northrup had the same idea, though he didn't look like he'd admit it. Saunders found him there.

"Ridiculous," Northrup said. "That creature would have us believe he controls vast, terrible powers. Look at him."

"I'm looking," Saunders said. He turned a thumb toward the crowd. "He does."

"Nonsense. He controls nothing, while we. . .we have analyzed all the forces, deciphered all the processes that are active here, and are modifying conditions to obtain the results we desire. We. . ."

"Were," Saunders said. Something tickled the back of his mind. "Has it occurred to you? He could be thinking the same way about us."

It ruffled Northrup's feathers some. "What? You're talking foolishness now. This charlatan, this fake, he will do his performance and change nothing, and after a while he will go away and permit us to go back to the work he has interrupted. That is all he is doing. Interfering with our work."

"I'm not so sure," Saunders said. He nodded again in the direction of the crowd. "He's got one kind of power we don't. They didn't come to see us. They came to watch him."

"I do not pretend to understand people's foolishness," Northrup said.

"Maybe it's time we did," Saunders said. "They're dangerous, those people. They're like a loaded gun. All they need is somebody to aim them and pull the trigger."

The acolyte's gong sounded again, unmusical as ever, then shifted to a tempo that was intricately syncopated, oddly compelling. The troupe's chant changed with it, became solemn with a hint of melody, and The Guru raised his arms—held them out sidewise like the wings of a bird stripped of feathers. The troupe's chant stopped as if cut by a switch, and The Guru's began.

At first it was a droning monotone, but slowly it grew in force and intonation. It became a staccato, intricately rhythmic yammering that communicated nothing sensible but nonetheless made a man hold his breath. Saunders glanced at the crowd. They stood rapt. Here and there, randomly, a hand, a knee, a body jerked as if struck by shards of The Guru's frenetic litany. It went on for a long time, and there was no other sound.

"You see?" Northrup said. "They are harmless as ladybugs."

Right then, they did look harmless. But they didn't know about Owens Valley. "Wait," Saunders said.

The chant went on. It was indebted more to the noise that passed for music in the popular media than to the East's mystic wisdom, but there was no way to doubt its power. If anyone drifted from the edges of the crowd, Saunders did not see

them. A man's hand beat time to the chant's spasms. A girl's body swayed. Part of his mind wondered, remotely, if perhaps he was himself caught in that spell. How could he know? How could he be sure?"

Caught, submerged in the flow of that pulsing chant, he wasn't instantly aware of the change when it came.

But he heard a man's shout from the crowd. For a moment it meant nothing. But then came an upsurge of babble and more shouts—a sudden swirl in the mob as people turned to a new point of attention. And from the center of that swirl a hand held up a red transistor set with nasal gabble coming out of it. Suddenly, he was aware again of the sun's bright heat; and there were more swirls in the crowd, more radios held aloft, more shouting. Someone ran out of the crowd and held a radio to The Guru's ear. The chant stopped. A grey hand at the end of a long grey arm swept the smoldering incense from the top of the chest. The lumps lay, still burning, among the pebbles.

The Guru stood on thin, almost fleshless legs. The wind snarled his hair. His goat's beard jutted fiercely, and the crowd's buzz hushed.

"A sign," he cried. But his voice was thin. Quickly, he crouched to the chest and came erect again with a small Buddha statue in his hands. "A sign!" he cried again, and this time his voice resounded grandly. "From Shiva! A sign! And Shiva says. . ."

If there was a time to break things up, it was now. Saunders raised the bull horn. "Stop," he said.

The bull horn made it a shout, echoing from the ramparts of the looming hill's brow. The Guru froze, his arm still high.

"You were warned," Saunders said. "You didn't listen. Now you have seen what comes of meddling in things you don't understand."

"No! Lies!" The Guru shouted. He spun around. "Lies! It is the gods that hold power, not small men, and it is they who speak through me, with my voice. Krishna, Vishnu, Shiva—and the great god Mota! And with my voice they tell you they have done this thing to punish those who claim to have the powers they alone possess. They. . ."

An ugly murmur in the crowd. Mutterings. A few shouts. Saunders thumbed the bull horn.

"All things that happen come from natural causes," he said. "Your talk of gods is childish. You take refuge in it because it is more comforting to blame malign gods for what

happens than to accept that they happen by accident, without motive. You want to think you're important enough for them to bother with, but the forces of nature say you're not important. You. . ."

He was taking too long to say what needed saying, and the people weren't listening. They made grumbling sounds, and a thrown stone struck near his feet. But he had to go on.

"You are so important to yourself, you think that gods speak with your tongue. That's arrogance. If you had one small splinter of humility. . ."

Another stone skipped past his ankles, and from the edge of his field of vision he saw movement. He looked, taking in a breath to speak again, and he saw one of Zim's men coming toward him with long strides and a warning hand raised and words taking shape on his face; but before Saunders could understand, there was an arm suddenly around his neck, a strangle hold that took him off balance and choked the power to speak from his throat.

Everything happened fast, then. It was a long time since he'd used the skills the army taught him, but his body remembered. Nor was his assailant skilled at hand-to-hand. It was the work of a moment to transform the strangle hold into a swirl of the gong bearer's robes, while behind him he heard The Guru's voice, shouts, and a howl from the crowd. And then he was down with his knee in the gong bearer's ribs, and the side of his hand making the gong bearer's larynx into something like mashed potatoes with one quick, measured chop.

But when he scrambled to retrieve the bull horn, it was too late. Whirling to his feet, he saw Epicenter's fence go down under the mob's weight like the ramp of an invasion barge. The marshals, the deputies, the patrolmen were just not there.

He stood helpless while the crowd swarmed around the pump house. Electric wires came down and sizzled on the ground. The cinder block walls held only for a moment before falling inward under the hammering of steel posts ripped from the wrecked fence. A corner went, and the gabled roof was torn off like a lid. Someone screamed with pain where it fell, but the crowd was as mindless as lemmings.

After that, it was hard to see what happened. There were too many people, and what they were doing was in the middle of them. One small group with sledge hammers was at work on the siphon's pipe where it brought water up the final slope. From the ruins of the pump house came the solid,

chinking sound of metal striking hard metal. The television men had got their camera turned. They manipulated the lenses. They swung its scan from one part of the mob to another. Saunders noticed their faces; as plain and methodical as surgeons, impervious to the destruction before their eyes. It might have been a football game.

A harder, sharper clank than the ones that had come before. A yell, and from the center of the swarm a shaft of spattering water burst upward. It fountained into glittering spray, silver in the sun's bright blaze. The wind scattered sheets of it down the hillside in erratic torrents. People yelped and ran, and even the men at the siphon dropped their hammers and fled from the expanding pool that poured from the gash they had torn in its side. The geyser reached higher and higher.

Saunders took a step forward. The injection well's top had been cracked off; it had to be stopped. He got only that far.

Something hurled him off his feet. Abrupt thunder shook the world, and the ground heaved like the deck of a ship in a storm. As if a sleeping giant had turned under his blanket of earth. There were shouts, screams, and—through it all—the roar of thunder. Behind him, the television van's springs squeaked and groaned.

Things steadied. He got as far as his hands and knees before the second shock struck. On the scarp where the sniper had lain, a promontory broke and came down in a tumble of rock, earth, and dust. He saw the solid earth ripple like the skin of a titanic drum. (He'd read about that. He'd known it happened. He'd never thought he would see it with his own eyes.) Thunder boomed again, so deep that he felt it with his knees and arms and the deepest core of his being. He was aware of pain where gravel and sand had stripped his hands raw.

It ended. The silence was touched by a whisper of wind. What had happened was illusion. Had to be. He waited, but the ground beneath his hands stayed firm, steady. All around, dazed people were slowly getting to their feet. The Guru was gone as if the earth had swallowed him.

The television camera had fallen on its side. One of the men struggled to lift it; Saunders bent to help. Together, they got it upright. The man was Pinero. He began checking the camera. "Well, you got your quake, all right."

"A bit more than we bargained for," Saunders nodded. He was still numb, still trying to understand. Nothing

like this had happened in all their time up in Alaska. The worst had been a mild shudder that made vibration patterns in the cup of coffee he'd been letting cool on the table. He tried to think what could have gone wrong.

Pinero went over to the van and opened the door in the back. "Hey, Simon," he said. "You got our link back, yet?"

"Working on it," came the reply from inside.

"Here we get a chance to do a quake live. Prime time in the East, too. And we blow it! We'll hear from old Caleb about that, you better believe."

"I said I'm working on it." Defensive, the voice was, caught between the inflexibility of real things and the demands of people. "I'm working on it."

Another member of the crew came across the bare ground with a portable camera clutched close to his body. "Got it all on tape." He patted the black case. "Start to finish." Pleased with himself.

"Simon, how's it coming?" Urgent, now that they had something to transmit. He whirled. "Where's that Northrup guy? We're going to need him."

Max Northrup came around the side of the van. "Ah, there you are, Jim," he said. He nodded politely to Pinero and stepped carefully over the cables on the ground. Saunders fell into step beside him.

"North One came unlocked," Saunders said. "The pump wasn't working and the water got into its zone."

"Yes," Northrup said. He walked with hands clasped behind him, head bent. "But did you notice? The first shock came within moments of when the wellhead cap was broken and the water began to spout. Now possibly this was a coincidence, but, on the other hand, do you think that such a slight release of pressure. . .?"

"It's something we'll have to check up on," Saunders admitted. He wasn't eager. "Alaska?"

"What? Oh. Yes, definitely." Northrup's shoes scattered sand and pebbles down the slope. "Even if we wanted, we could do nothing here. Even if all the strains on this section of the fault were not discharged—I'm afraid they have been—this is not the place for us to experiment."

"Obviously," Saunders said. Before them, at the foot of the slope, the fault's trace was torn like ploughed ground. The landslide was a quiescent sprawl of rubble. The wind made soft sounds.

"We must not do experiments in places where people live," Northrup said. "Never. Unless we are sure what will happen."

Saunders bent and scooped up a handful of pebbles. They stung his palm. This hill had been an outwash delta once, truncated by slippage on the fault.

"Oh, we know what'll happen, all right. If we tried anything more around here. . ."

He waved a hand back toward the road. Cars were getting under way, bouncing off under their own power. The show was over. Dust clouds lifted.

"If we try anything more, those people. . .they'll come back. Or people like them. That's one thing we forgot, all the time we were up in Alaska. We thought we were testing all the factors we'd be working with, down here. We forgot about people."

"People," Northrup said, as if he was trying to measure them. "We shall have to develop techniques for dealing with people." He paused. "We shall have to educate them."

Saunders stood a little below him on the slope. He looked up at him and let the pebbles fall out of his hand. He decided it would do no good to tell him that, in practical terms, Project Slickenside was dead. No one would dare try anything like that for a hundred years. "I suppose," he said. "Or give up the whole idea."

"No," Max Northrup said, very firm. "We must not even think about that. The value of earthquake control. . .merely the lives to be saved, if we consider nothing else. . .we must find a way to convince these people it is for their own good. Make them understand that. . ."

Pinero came down the slope in a rattle of pebbles. "Dr. Northrup?" He was out of breath. "We've got our relay link set up again. Could we ask you a few questions? I realize it's an awkward time for you, but our viewers. . ."

"I would be very pleased to explain what has happened," Northrup said, smiling affably, preening a little. And to Saunders, "We've got to do it, you know."

The terrible part, Saunders thought, watching him toil back up the slope, was that he honestly thought it could be done.

AVRAM DAVIDSON

BOOKS

THE 1972 ANNUAL WORLD'S BEST SF, edited by Donald A. Wollheim with Arthur W. Saha, DAW Books, 95¢

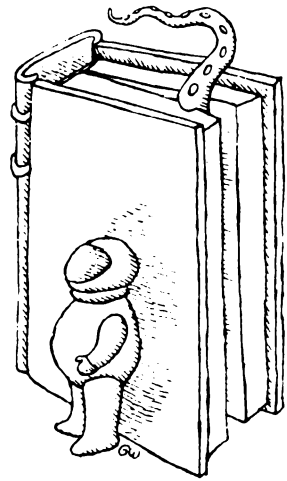
THE BEST SCIENCE FICTION OF THE YEAR, edited by Terry Carr, Ballantine, $1.25

CLARION II, edited by Robin Scott Wilson, Signet, 95¢

BEST SCIENCE FICTION STORIES OF THE YEAR, edited by Lester del Rey, Dutton, $6.95

OLD New Yorker STORY: woman sees a pushcart with signs *Peaches 3¢* and *Peaches 5¢*, asks the difference. Pedlar answers, "The 3¢ peaches are best, but the 5¢ peaches are better." We should be grateful to Robin Scott Wilson for not compounding confusion by also using the well-worked word BEST. And, should yet another publisher want to get in the act (and why not? It says by the Talmud, *The jealousy of the scribes increases wisdom)*, I pointed out that no anthologist is using the word better. . .and that I am available. —No one of these books contains a story by Alfred *BEST*er. Odd, ah well.

Donald A. Wollheim, I quote from the blurb to the DAW book, "was responsible for the first science fiction anthology ever published. . ." Much later, he and Terry Carr were collaborators on the annual SF antho of Ace Books; each is now independent and edits his own annual, both of which retain some flavor of the former conjoint one. I don't know if Lester del Rey has been in science fiction as long as Don Wollheim, but I'm sure I've been seeing his name since the late 30s. The people from the Clarion workshop are mostly new and young. Terry Carr—well-known fan-publisher in the 50s, professional writer since the early 60s—fits, timewise, in



between. Thus, in these four books, all published in the last year, we cover almost forty years of science fictional experience.

And here we go with WOLLHEIM. I *think* Larry Niven's *The Fourth Profession* contains material for two effective stories; extraterrestrials peddle RNA pills for, among others, booze. Joanna Russ's *Gleepsite* is weird as all get-out, D.A.W. admits he doesn't get it all, and so do I. *The Bear With The Knot In Its Tail* (Stephen Tall) is old-fashioned spaceship stuff, but it kind of succeeds; Michael G. Coney's *Sharks of Pentreath* is mostly new-fangled, with an old-fashioned heartthrob at the end. In *A Little Knowledge*, Poul Anderson gives us The Mixture As Before. . .as, "It orbited its G9 sun at an average distance of some three astronomical units, thus receiving about one-eighteenth the radiation Earth gets". . .plus three space-rogues and an appealing alien. Crisp and effective are my words for Christopher Priest's *Real-Time World*—about Isolation, Illusion, and Rumor, painted full of tongues. R.A. Lafferty's stories are always clever, but *All Pieces of a River Shore* is really beautiful; contains touches like, " 'Tourists don't like to crawl on their bellies in caves. I don't know why. I always liked to crawl on my belly in caves,' " which distinguish the real writer from the type-writer. *With Friends Like These*, by Alan Dean Foster, is also "kind of old-fashioned spaceship stuff," slightly spoofy, mildly funny. Dr. Leonard Tushnet is in top form with *Aunt Jennie's Tonic:* tale of a pharmacologist face-to-face with an herbal style Wise Woman; lovely rich detail—also Dr. Tushnet creates an Old Jewish Woman who is, *donk der Eyvishter*, not in the least like Molly Picon playing Yente the Matchmaker.

E. C. Bertin wrote *Time-storm* in, and translated it from, Flemish; Hugo Gernsback would've loved it. Arthur C. Clarke's *Transit of Earth* is grim and effective. *Gehenna* (Barry N. Malzberg) is a brief, taut, *true*-sounding tale of parallel universes: look closely to see which is ours. And Harlan Ellison concludes WOLLHEIM with a story about visiting one's own childhood, called *One Life, Furnished In Early Poverty.*

I don't much care for the cover on WOLLHEIM, but DAW at least tells us who painted it (John Schoenherr). I much like the cover on CARR, but all the information I get is that it is "printed in USA." Come on, guys, give the cover artists a break from now on, will you.

Now, onward, with CARR. All you need to know about *Occam's Scalpel* is that it is by Theodore Sturgeon. . .I'll add that the wind-up packs not one but three successive punches. In *The Queen of Air and Darkness* Poul Anderson draws on everything from physics to runic rhyme. . .with throwaway lines like, "One light year is not much as galactic distances go. You could walk it in about 270 million years." Not with *my* feet. (I do wish Poul would take the verb *fleer* and give it back to the Skraelings.) And Robert Silverberg's *In Entropy's Jaws* is a fine novelette like a recurrently in-and-out view of a Byzantine mosaic of the ouroboros serpent.

The Sliced-Crosswise Only-On-Tuesday World of Philip Jose Farmer is daft, deft, impeccably logical, with an O. Henryesque ending, too. Reading a story by Arthur C. Clarke is like seeing a Chesley Bonestall painting as a color film; subtitle *A Meeting With Medusa* as See Jupiter and Live. Quite a different pattern of molecules, Lloyd Biggle, Jr.'s *The Frayed String on the Stretched Forefinger of Time*, a wry, clever suspense thriller. *How Can We Sink When We Can Fly?* is a two-part harmony by Alexei Panshin which, I am afraid, was ahead of its time. Longlong ago a friend told me, "If something's bothering you, drink whiskey," and I have found this advice good. Nowadays people who are the age we were then say, "Even if something isn't bothering you, take dope." Can I resist the antique tale of the Good Woman who asked T.S. Elliot, this was about 1930, see, "Mr. Eliot, what gives you the strength to write such beautiful poetry?" His answer? "Gin and drugs, madame; gin and drugs." The point? Norman Spinrad's *No Direction Home*. The Theme of Ursula K. LeGuin's *Vaster Than Empires and More Slow* is the familiar one of the planetary probe team, but first she tells us that her people are all insane. . .and then she *proves* it. . . It's a kick in the head, but by far even kickier is *All The Last Wars At Once*, by George Alec Effinger. Jesus Christ. Wow.

By now you may have realized that CARR and WOLLHEIM are both reprint anthologies, if you hadn't known before; so is DEL REY. CLARION II WILSON is bran-new, a blessing on its youthful head. Also, besides stories, it contains criticism by such venerables as James Sallis, U.K. LeGuin, Frederik Pohl, Damon Knight, Kate Wilhelm, Harlan Ellison, Joanna Russ, and Robin Scott Wilson. Starting the book off with a bang is

Robert Thurston's *Punchline**: a classic, I predict. Steve Herbst's *Magic Passes* tastes like the old Ray Bradbury. *In The Greenhouse* (Lin Nielsen) is about sentience in plants—and insentience in people. Here comes G.A. Effinger again, in *Early To Bed*, which I've read maybe four times by now and am still impressed by: another classic. F.M. Busby's *Here, There, and Everywhere* is an other-planet story on the Greater Love Hath No Man theme. And if Simon Girty had written science fiction, he might have written *The Hanged Man;* but Edward Bryant did. And Molly Daniel wrote *Winter Housecleaning*, about growing old. . .and young. —Hey, I am getting TIRED of cryonic stories! Even so, Robert Wissner's *Frozen Assets* jerked a laugh out of me. And, as I condemned Eleanor Lief's Everything-is-white, A,DV story, so I gotta admit that Dave Skal's Everything-is-white, CLARION II story, *Crayola*, is better. I did not dig *To The Mountains*, by Laura Haney. —Ed Bryant, having eaten an eye ball, is swiftly back with *Their Thousandth Season*, giving a rich, gamy, decadent flavor to an ancient idea.

Sheest, these CLARION II people pop back up like a Happy Hooligan in an old Try-Your-Aim show, so here's Robert Thurston with *Get FDR!*. . .and who seems to agree with me that anyone nostalgic for any part of this rotten century is crazy. James Sutherland's *At The Second Solstice* is about dolphins, earthquakes, and the stupid race of Men. *Notes On A Restless Urge*, by Robert Wissner (say, didn't he just—) is very funny at the end. Glen Cook's *Dragons In The Sky* seems to be about a mile-long spaceship, and I cut out through the air lock after the first ½ mi. *A Modest Proposal* by Russell Bates links overpopulation, reincarnation, and terrorism; Rick Norwood's *Omnia Triste* is a cute vignette on the three wishes theme; and Lisa Tuttle's *Stranger In The House*, like Harlan Ellison's *One Early Life* (see WOLLHEIM, is a Visit To One's Own Childhood story: the bitchy boyfriend is very good. And yet *again!* here is Robert Thurston! *The Good Life*, I would value if only for the bit about King Edward III being the son of King Edward Jr.—It may be that by now things are getting a bit blurry here at Clarion II: Geo. Alec Effinger in *Sand and Stones* is, I suppose, *good*, but not as good as before. (That's what happens when a writer has to compete with

**Well, this is the only one which isn't bran-new.*

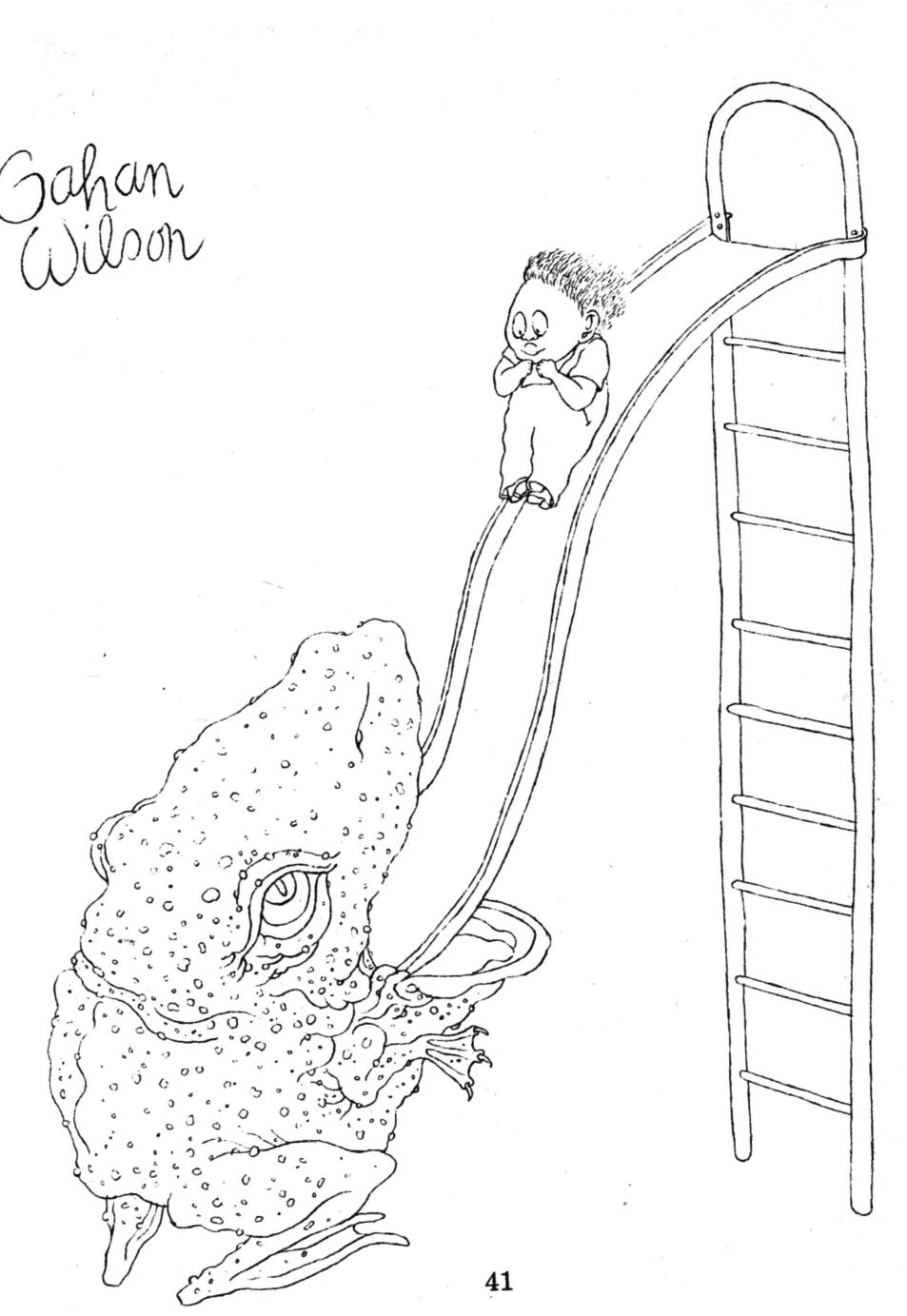
himself, *sigh*): I could quote lots of lines from the critical pieces in CLARION II (Clarion proper is an sf workshop, remember), but must be content with James Sallis's, ". . .we have not yet demonstrated that writing can be taught, only that it may be learned."

This column's only hardcover volume is the DEL REY. Both WOLLHEIM and CARR contain Larry Niven's *Fourth Profession* and Theodore Sturgeon's *Occam;* CARR *and* DEL REY have both got *Occam* and Phil Farmer's *Sliced-Crosswise;* and Poul Anderson's *Little Knowledge* and *Occam* are in both WOLLHEIM and DEL REY. Thus, *Occam* appears in WOLLHEIM, CARR, and DEL REY; I suppose it only escaped CLARION WILSON because Ted is over 30 and they didn't trust him. Well, new Sturgeon is rare. Onward with DEL REY, now. Robert Silverberg's here, with *Good News From The Vatican.* (Nebula Award): funny; wryly so, Mr. S. not being a man for the boffola. James Tiptree, Jr.'s *I'll Be Waiting For You When The Swimming Pool Is Empty* is a rollicking, frolicking account of a Nice Terran Boy on a Savage Planet. But with David M. Locke's *The Power of the Sentence* we have something altogether different, an almost-frightening creation of alien minds, told exclusively in the form of a lecture on grammar. Perhaps another classic.

Harry Harrison lived long in Italy, the scene of his *The Wicked Flee. . .*question is, *which* Italy did he live in? There hain't too many SF telephone stories, and, as I wrote one (based on an idea donated by Ward Moore) of them, I'm pleased to be pleased with Tom Scortia's *When You Hear The Tone.* But Burt K. Filer's *Hot Potato,* a tale of nuclear disarmament and intraspace, struck me as very heavy stuff for humor. Harlan Ellison *and* A.E. Van Vogt! Their *The Human Operators* is classical spaceship material, plus sex. *Autumn-time* is a brief, effective snippet on hyperurbanization; and W. Macfarlane's *To Make A New Neanderthal* has, basically, the same theme as Sturgeon's *Occam;* of course, handled differently. Welcome, welcome, R.A. Lafferty, with your *The Man Underneath*—rich, detailed carny background, but chiefly a story of the human personality. I've made a lot of notes for a novel about winged men which I'll never write, as B. Alan Burhoe has already written it as a short story, *Ornithanthropus:* old fashioned/good. It ain't *nothing* like CLARION II. And Larry Niven's *Rammer* is a combo of

cryonics and space travel, with some more RNA for good measure.

DEL REY concludes with *The Science Fiction Year-Book*, an interesting summing-up. I didn't like Larry Ratzkin's eye-catching jacket design. And I urge all CLARION II authors to protest the non-mention of *their* book's cover artist, "Cheap, cheap," said the bird."


Gahan
Wilson

Thom Jones is 27, has a B. A. in English from the University of Washington, a M.F.A. from the University of Iowa, and is currently in France, working on a novel. You can't hardly get more relevant than his first story for us; it's an animal liberation piece with a good bite at the end.

Brother Dodo's Revenge

by THOM JONES

BROTHER BEAR SCOOPED up a bunch of pine boughs and sat on them. He considered walking down to the creek for some water before the meeting began but decided against it when he heard footsteps approaching; there wouldn't be time. The footsteps grew louder, then suddenly stopped. Brother Coon stepped into the forest clearing. The moon was bright and nearly full.

"Evenin', Brother Coon. How's life been treatin' you?"

"Not bad, Brother Bear. How's yourself?"

"I can't complain, I guess. I had me a bad tooth, but I lost it the other day. I feel a whole lot better."

Brother Coon searched out a comfortable spot and sat. He licked his paws and brushed his whiskers back. "Yup. I know how it is when a tooth goes bad. Yes, sir."

"How's the missis?" Brother Bear asked.

"She's none too happy 'bout the movement, but you know how females are. It ain't nuthin' I can't handle."

"That's right. Just kick 'em in the ass an' tell 'em to shut up."

"Yes in-deed," Brother Coon said.

"How's the cubs doin'?"

Brother Coon preened at the fur on his forelegs. "Didn't I tell you? They moved up North a few weeks back. They is full growed."

"Already?" Brother Bear said. "Well dang my britches . . .here today an' gone tomorrow."

Brother Coon examined a bump on his leg. "They wuz eatin' me outta house an' home. There ain't the food there used to be 'round these parts. I told 'em to head up North. I'd go myself if I wuz younger."

"I'm with you there, brother. I've been up North myself, an' I think I just might go back after the movement. I like a cooler climate, hibernating in the winter. It sure is nice. Too damn hot to hibernate in this country. Somehow I just don't feel the same unless I do, either."

Brother Coon seemed concerned with his bump. "Well, I won't argue you there, brother. A body's got to do what's right."

Brother Fox and Brother Rat stepped silently into the clearing. Brother Bear looked up at them. "Evenin' friends. Just sit yourselves down an' take a load off."

"Don't mind if we do," Brother Rat said. "Where's everybody?"

"They'll be comin' anytime," Brother Bear said.

"What's ailin' Sister Cow back there? Brother Moose is tending to her, but he wouldn't say nuthin'."

"I reckon Brother Crow will go into that when he gets here," Brother Bear said.

Brothers Alligator and Pig moved into the clearing.

"Evenin'," Brother Bear said.

Brother Alligator and Brother Pig nodded around as they sat. The others nodded back.

"Nice night fer a meetin', ain't it, boss?" Brother Alligator said. As he opened his mouth, Brother Lark jumped from his shoulder and perched himself on Brother Alligator's jaw. When he saw that Brother Alligator intended to leave his mouth open, he began to pick at the leftovers in his teeth.

Brother Alligator lifted his jaw to speak, and Brother Lark rolled off backwards. "Brother Turtle told me to send his regrets, he couldn't make it tonight."

"Why's that?" Brother Bear asked.

"I don't know, brother. He didn't eee-laborate." Brother Alligator laughed at this and opened his mouth halfway for Brother Lark.

"I think we could do with a rain," Brother Bear said.

"What's ailin' Sister Cow, Brother Bear?" It was Brother Pig.

"You'll find out shortly," Brother Bear said. "Here comes Brother Crow."

Brother Crow walked briskly

into the clearing. He was accompanied by his bodyguard, Hawk. Sisters Mosquito, Grasshopper, and Flea followed. The group walked to the center of the clearing, and there the insects rested on a rock. Hawk noticed something at the edge of the clearing and moved over to check it. Satisfied, he stood there alert. Brother Crow walked in a tight circle.

"Good evening, brothers."

The animals nodded to him and said good evening.

"Well, I wonder where the rest are?" Brother Bear said.

From below the creek a howl was heard. Soon Brothers Wolf, Bat, Possum, Muskrat, and Snake entered the clearing. A group of birds followed them. Brother Crow continued to pace in the small circle as the newcomers sat and got comfortable. He flapped his wings and all was quiet.

"That looks like most of us. If you see any members that couldn't be here tonight, be sure to fill them in on what happens. As you all know, last week's meeting was canceled through the efforts of Farmer Brown and his hunting party. I'm sorry to report that Sister Deer was killed that night. We will deal personally with Farmer Brown and the guilty humans later. We were damn lucky no one else got hurt. I'm sure that this grave lesson should impress all of you with the urgency with which we must continue the movement. I can only stress how important it is that we stick together and face all adversity together, as brothers. We must put out petty differences aside and unite against the common enemy."

Brother Bear slapped his paw to the earth. "Amen, brother!"

Brother Crow continued. "If we do not stick together, we will be defeated. We have been through this before; we agreed to restrain our natural impulses. This is the only way we can destroy the human devil before he kills us all. We cannot violate the rules as *you* did Brother Fox when you ate Brother Mouse last night."

Brother Fox jumped to his feet. "That's not true. I did no such thing."

Brother Crow looked up an oak tree near the edge of the clearing. "Brother Owl, are you up there?"

"Yes, brother."

"Then tell the others what you told me earlier," Brother Crow said.

"Last night I saw Brother Fox kill and eat Brother Mouse near the creek."

"You dirty stoolie, Owl," Brother Fox said. "And who are you to talk, Crow? It's easy for you, you eat corn. I can't eat corn. I've got to have meat."

"That's true, Brother Fox, but how about Brother Wolf or Brother Owl, or Brother Alligator? They eat meat, but none of them broke the rule. As I remember you yourself were first to agree to live on Sister Chicken's fine eggs until human flesh could be provided for the predatory brothers. Yet you broke the rule. Why?"

Brother Fox was humbled. "I'm sorry. I was weak, give me another chance."

"You've had your chance," Brother Crow said. "You must pay with your life. . .Hawk."

"God, no! Not him. No!" Brother Fox broke for the forest. Hawk followed swiftly. The animals in the clearing were dead silent. In a moment a scream and the sound of bones snapping was heard. Hawk returned to the clearing and Brother Crow continued.

"I apologize for that bit of nastiness, brothers, but I hope it emphasizes the fact that we are all brothers, every one of us. Regardless of size or species, no one is more important than the other. Brother Fox ain't more important than Brother Mouse just 'cause he's bigger, just like I ain't no better than Brother Bear 'cause I can fly. Now ain't that right? We, the creatures of this field, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquillity, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, have ordained and established these rules. They wasn't made to be broke."

"Hallelujah," Brother Pig said. "That was a right pretty speech."

"Thank you," Brother Crow said.

"You shouldn't have killed him, Crow. You didn't have to do that," Brother Alligator said, knocking Brother Lark over backwards off his jaw.

"I'm afraid I did," Brother Crow said. "We must heed the rules, each of us, without exception. When, in the course of events, it becomes necessary for one ANIMAL (that's all of us, brothers), when it becomes necessary to dissolve the bonds which have connected us with the humans, we must assume the Powers of the Earth, the separate and equal Station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God we are entitled to. We hold these truths to be self-evident, brothers, that all animals are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. To secure these rights there are rules we must live by, yet the devil man will not live by them. When a long

train of abuses and usurpations pursue the object of destroying this here earth, it becomes our duty to throw off such practices and provide new guards to prevent their future occurrences. Man has established an absolute Tyranny over us. To prove this, let Facts be submitted to a candid world. At this moment he is driving us into extinction."

"An' extinction ain't no little sleep," Brother Alligator said. "It fo' evah."

"Brother Whale, Brother Wolf, Brother Elephant, Brother Whooping Crane," the Crow said.

"Brother Buffalo," Brother Pig said.

"Yes, Brother Buffalo, look what he did to Brother Buffalo," Brother Crow said.

"Brother Carrier Pigeon," Brother Wolf said.

"And Brother Dodo," Brother Bear said.

"Yes, Brother Dodo. Not one of our smartest brothers, but he was honest and now he is no more," Brother Crow said.

"How 'bout our Australian Brothers Platypus, Kangaroo, an' the Tasmanian Wolf?" Brother Coon said.

"I understand man is shooting Brother Kangaroo just for sport. Also Brother Jackrabbit, just to see him die, or to tear off his hide. It's shameful, I tell you. How many of us have gotten their hides torn off just to keep man warm?"

"I got mine tore off to make Davy Crockett hats," Brother Coon said.

"Brother Pig gets his tore off to make shoes and baseball gloves and footballs. And they make ham and bacon out of him and pork meat and hot dogs and bologna and dog food. They don't waste nuthin'," Brother Bear said.

"Brother Leopard an' Brother Tiger get their hides stripped to make rugs and coats, so does Brother Mink and Brother Bear an'. . . ."

"Yes," demanded Brother Crow.

"I was goin' to say Brother Fox," Brother Rat said.

"Well, you can, in a general sense. We're talking in a general sense."

"They pulled Brother Elephant's teeth to make piano keys," added Brother Owl. "Disgraceful!"

"And they rip off my hide to make purses," Brother Alligator said.

"And look what he's done to you, Brother Rat. Look at you; he hates you worst of all. He has traps for you, poisons. You, he locks up in laboratories and shoots full of cancer and TB. You, he tortures and kills by the thousands."

"I'm hip to it," Brother Rat said.

"Ain't many of any of us left. Ain't many of us that ain't been tortured and degradated by man. Ain't many of us that don't have a list long as your arm against the devil man. We must stop him now," Brother Crow said.

"Amen," Brother Alligator said toppling Brother Lark over backwards.

"More than a hundred of us wiped out forever and, friends, that list is getting bigger by the day. The time is now, we must stop him now, before it's too late," Brother Crow said.

The animals in the clearing were worked into a frenzy. They shifted themselves restlessly, angrily.

"But I have some good news," Brother Crow said. "Tonight I have Sisters Flea, Mosquito, and Grasshopper with me."

The insects danced up and the others beat at the ground in approval.

"Where?" joked Brother Moose. Assorted laughter broke out and the tension subsided slightly.

"Yes, I have good news," continued Brother Crow. "These sisters have just returned from a special training session at the central unit. As you all know, this here movement did not begin with our insect brothers' help. Some of our members, however, have been negotiating with them from the start, and now I'm happy to announce we have cóme to terms."

"Hallelujah!" Brother Alligator said, tumbling Brother Lark from his jaw.

"Hallelujah!" Brother Coon said.

Others beat the ground in approval.

"Instead of biting us, Sister Mosquito is going to turn her attentions full on the humans. Once the movement is completed, we shall provide her with human captives for feeding purposes. Now don't let this worry you. What'll happen is Sister Mosquito will have first eats with a select group of humans. After that we will isolate the humans until they recover and then send them through for eating by the predators. It may sound cold to you, brothers, but when did the human ever show us any compassion?"

"Right on," Brother Pig said.

"Now Sister Mosquito here will help us achieve our objective much faster than previously planned. Sister Bacteria has also joined forces with us. She has developed a new virus, one the humans have not yet encountered, and one we don't think he will be able to control. The central committee expects to get a 30 per cent kill with this virus. The remaining

70 per cent should survive, but 30 per cent isn't bad. Sister Mosquito here has infected herself and will start biting humans. I'll show you what happens when she does. Brother Moose, could you bring Sister Cow out here?" Brother Crow looked among the members for Brother Moose.

Brother Moose got to his feet. "Just a sec," he said.

Sister Cow was soon dragged to the center of the clearing. She was on her side burning with fever.

"Now this here is Sister Cow," Brother Crow started. "She was accidentally infected by Sister Bacteria when she wandered into the restricted testing area. Brother Robin was there to warn her, but Sister Cow was too stubborn to listen."

Sister Cow lifted her head and spoke weakly, "Stop this silly movement, all of you, you'll destroy all we've ever worked for."

"As you can see, Sister Cow is delirious from infection, the same infection Sister Mosquito will inflict on the humans," Brother Crow said.

"Stop this nonsense. They will kill us all. Why can't you leave them alone. All they want is a little milk. . . ." Sister Cow pleaded.

"Sister Cow, isn't it true that they castrate all your male calves? Tell me," Brother Crow said.

"Yes, but. . . ."

"And don't they get them good and fat and then haul them off to a slaughter house, hang them up by their heels, and then smash them on the head with a sledge hammer?"

"Yes, but. . . ."

"But what, you Uncle Tom ass," Brother Alligator said furiously. "You're just trying to save your butt." He took a deep breath, accidentally sucking Brother Lark down his throat, swallowing him. He quickly looked to see if anyone saw. Satisfied no one did and with his teeth clean and his stomach full, he smiled.

Sister Cow dropped her head to the ground. "But we grow up in peace and quiet; we get a few good years."

"They have uncle-tommed you, sister. Just like they did with Brother Dog," Brother Crow said.

Sister Cow gave a cry of anguish. Her legs began to tremble violently.

"Isn't there anything we can do for her?" Brother Coon asked.

"We can just put an early end to her suffering. . . .Hawk!" Brother Crow motioned to his bodyguard. Hawk moved quickly to Sister Cow, his eyes glistening in the moonlight.

"Not here, Hawk. Brother

Bear, can you help Hawk? And Hawk, be quick, all right."

"I'm always quick," Hawk said.

Brother Bear dragged Sister Cow out of the clearing while Hawk followed. A moment later a scream was heard, and Hawk and Brother Bear returned to the clearing.

"What about the other 70 per cent?" Brother Coon asked.

"I'm glad you brought that up," Brother Crow said. "Sister Flea here has brought back the bubonic plague. She will work with Brother Rat. We expect a 40 per cent kill with it since the humans have lost their natural immunity to the disease. It will be entirely safe so long as we eat none of the carrion. The only flesh the predators will eat will come from healthy, inspected humans."

"How about the remaining 30 per cent?" Brother Pig asked.

Brother Crow scratched at the ground with his foot. "To sustain the movement, we intend to keep 6 per cent of the humans for our own feeding purposes. These we will obtain from various geographical areas —a matter that doesn't concern our section. We will be going for a total kill. The central unit will provide us from outside once the movement is underway. Brother Grasshopper will be involved in a massive destruction of wheat, barley, corn, and other major crops. Sister Bacteria has a few other surprises as well."

"But what will the vegetarian brothers be eatin' while the predator brothers is eatin' humans?"

"A good question, Brother Rat. Our insect brothers have been instructed to destroy only certain crops. Enough will be left for us to grow fat and have an easy life."

"When do we start?" Brother Coon asked.

"Our insect brothers begin tomorrow. We will wait until the humans are sufficiently weakened before we make our attack. The central unit will notify us as to the exact time," Brother Crow said.

Brother Owl called down from his tree. "Brother Robin is sounding the alarm."

"Can you see what it is, Brother Owl?"

"Holy shit!"

"What is it?"

"It's Farmer Brown again. He's right on top of us, everyone move out, fast!"

The animals ran across the clearing in a sheer panic, much like humans running from a burning movie house. In the middle several collided, tumbled, and scratched their way away. Farmer Brown was quickly on the scene with two fellow humans. They discharged

shotgun fire into the clearing once and then again. Brother Crow was blown apart as he tried to rise over the fire. Hawk saw this and advanced on one of the hunters and tore a wicked gash across the man's face. He dove at Farmer Brown, who ducked down covering his head with his arms. Hawk managed to tear a piece of flesh from Brown's finger before he furiously beat his way into the forest, bolting the meat down as he flew. Brown fired his shotgun, but Hawk was quickly out of range.

"You goddamn son of a bitch," cried Brown as he shook his fist. "I'll get you, I'll get you!"

Brown and his companion turned to Hawk's first victim. He was on his knees, his face in his hands; his body trembled in shock and disbelief. Hawk had opened a deep, blood-gushing rip that ran diagonally from the man's eyebrow down across his nose and cheek into his neck. It stopped less than a half inch from his jugular vein. Brown tied a handkerchief around the lower part of the man's face, from which most of the bleeding took place. With another he dabbed at the man's forehead. "That bird attacked us like he knew how," Brown said.

"I'll say he knew how," the man said.

"I mean like a damn human bein'," Brown said.

The third hunter moved to the edge of the clearing.

"Hey, Brown," he said, "we shot one of your pigs."

"One of my pigs?"

"Yup, it's got yer mark on it."

"Well, how in the hell did one of my pigs get out here?"

"Well, get yourself over here and take a look if you don't believe me."

Brown left his wounded companion with the handkerchief pressed to his forehead. Walking over, he looked at the hole in his finger. He sucked at it. It was numb.

"Goddamn," Brown said. "He's one of mine all right."

"And look at this," the man said pointing to the wounded Brother Alligator. "A gator. We're two miles from water, and here's a damn gator."

"Is he still alive?" asked the wounded man.

"Yup," Brown said. "His foot is blowed off."

The man seized his shotgun and ran over to Brother Alligator, who desperately tried to drag away. The man jammed his gun into Brother Alligator's mouth and fired. Brown kicked the dead animal over to see where the pellets ripped out. There was a hole just under the alligator's throat, and the surrounding flesh smoked. It

looked like hamburger. The men laughed briefly.

Brown stepped into the forest where he saw the carcass of Sister Cow. The other followed. They looked for gunshot wounds but found none. Sister Cow's neck had been torn. Next they discovered the body of Brother Fox.

"This is the dangdest thing I ever saw," Brown said. "You ever see so many different critters so close together?"

"Hell, no. Somethin' ain't right."

"I know. An' I swore I could hear voices tawkin', 'fore we got here."

"Me too," Brown said. "Same as last week. I didn't wanna say nuthin', I figured you boys would think I was nuts."

"I heard it too," the wounded hunter said. "You reckon we oughtta get the deputy?"

"I guess. Somethin's goin' on. First let's get that pig back and butchered 'fore he goes bad in this heat."

"How 'bout skinnin' that gator. That hide will bring eighty bucks."

"Well, hurry up about it," the wounded man said. "I got to get to a doctor 'bout my face. You oughtta get that finger looked at, Brown."

"I intend to," Brown said.

The men went to work on Brother Alligator. Sister Mosquito landed on the back of the wounded man's neck and bit. The man slapped at the virus-infected insect, but Sister Mosquito jumped back, the damage done.

"You know," Brown said. "I coulda swore I saw a bear."

"Me too," the wounded man said. "And a moose."

"A moose!" Brown said. "That sure is peculiar."

Sister Mosquito bit Farmer Brown on the wrist. It was a good bite, Brown didn't even notice. From there she went to the third man. She rested on the man's shirt for a moment and then flew to his arm and bit. The man didn't feel it until Sister Mosquito withdrew her proboscis and jumped away. The man slapped.

"Now there's goddamn mosquitoes," he said. "Let's get outta here."

The wounded man picked up Brother Alligator's hide while the other two carried Brother Pig off after first gutting him. "I know," he said, "pesky little bastards, ain't they?"

Sister Mosquito raised high into the moonlight above the clearing. "WHEEE EEEE EEEE," she went. "EEEE EEEE EEEE." □

Concerning Professor Rood's linguistics class, in which the "deep structure" of language is revealed, with astonishing results.

Chalk Talk

by EDWARD WELLEN

MAYBE BECAUSE IT WAS May. But Professor Rood felt carbonated blood bubble-dance through his veins. It gave such bounce to his morning greeting of his tall leathery colleague and rival, Professor Kriss, when they met in the hallway that he drew a look of surprise.

Maybe because Zoe Albemarle—the chalk broke twice before he got hold of himself and used the proper pressure—sat in class in an even more revealing dress than usual.

Maybe it was feeling the potency of mind over matter and of energy over both.

In any case, he found himself launching into his old lecture on linguistics with new zest.

"Thanks to Noam Chomsky and Transformational Grammar, we learn that—" He chalked on the blackboard:

John loves Mary.

Mary is loved by John.

"—which is one sentence, in its active and passive voices, is merely the 'surface structure' of the sentence.

"We may think we see it plain, as *from* a plane—" He waited till laughter had manifested itself, then went on. "—the solid green of a rain forest. But below the surface are the reelings and writhings that make the floor of a Freudian jungle a lively place. Dr. Chomsky calls this underneathness, this grimmer grammar, the 'deep structure.'

"But it is just here where things are getting interesting that Dr. Chomsky fails us. At least, in spite of his computer readouts and world view, he has not made clear to me the nature of this deep structure. He tells us that the foundations of all languages are a finite set of innate universals. But just what are these universals?

"As I hesitate to break in on Dr. Chomsky and his greater concerns to ask him for—to

follow the forest metaphor—'clear-cutting,' I've been trying to work it out for myself.

"I began by fantasying the deep structure. I've said it's a Freudian jungle, and I won't describe it except to say I was damn happy to hack my way out. After that bum trip I withdrew to the comparative safety and sanity of surface structure."

Another pause for laughter to manifest itself. It manifested itself delightfully through Zoe Albemarle.

Where was he? Ah, yes.

"I might have vegetated there, forever unable to see the trees for the forest. But luckily surface structure lends itself Proteus-like to variations. Of these the most promising seemed—" He chalked:

John generates love for Mary.
Mary attracts love from John.

"This at once suggested an electromagnetic infrastructure, quite in keeping with the make-up of the brain. Hardly a breakthrough, however. Then it struck me. In changing 'love' from verb to noun, I had stumbled across an innate universal!

"Long before the Industrial Revolution, man had the feeling things are taking over, or at least have a will of their own. Picture Neanderthal Man chipping a flint and blaming a skinned knuckle on the perversity of the material or the tool. Love, of course, is not a thing but a process. Still, this *further* formulation of the sentence gives a true sense of the underlying nature of this depersonalized world in which we are all strangers." He chalked:

Love connects John to Mary.
Mary is connected to John by love.

There it was, in white and black. And it had finished itself right on time. The classroom began emptying. He stood looking at the writing on the blackboard. Carve *that* on a tree, Noam, he thought with a smile. The smile was as much for Zoe Albemarle lingering in the tail of his eye. His chest swelled, sending the dribbles of chalk on his jacket flying in a cloudy cascade.

"Yes, my dear?" The voice did not sound quite like his own.

Zoe leaned plumply toward him.

"There's this I don't understand, Professor Rood—" She pointed to the blackboard.

He dusted his fingers and reached out to touch her.

Then it happened.

Zoe screeched.

He saw the writing on the blackboard shiver loose.

It slid down the slate, tripped the eraser off the ledge, followed the eraser to the floor, gathered itself, then struck out for the doorway. Zoe had beat it out and vanished. It flowed over floorboards, doorsill, floorboards, slithering along the hallway toward Professor Kriss's classroom.

Professor Rood trailed his handwriting. Stooping and straining to see, he thought it crawled along on tiny rootlike pseudopodia. In the mud at the bottom of the sea a living jelly feeds, grows, and multiplies. It takes carbonate of lime from the brine to make a skeleton for itself. The jelly dies and rots and adds its skeletal corpse's mite to the chalk deposit that has been building since long before the coming of man. This living jelly puts forth rootlike pseudopodia.

Professor Kriss's classroom was empty but for Professor Kriss sitting at her desk over student papers. She did not look up as the chalking climbed baseboard and wall and, an inverted waterfall, streamed up over the ledge and onto the blackboard.

She looked up as Professor Rood's shadow fell across her desk and found him staring at the blackboard. Professor Kriss followed his gaze.

Six times the sentence had written itself:

John loves Mary.

Mary Kriss got up, and up, and nearly swept John Rood off his feet in a hug.

"Why didn't you say so before, John?"

RETURN TO COBRA ISLAND

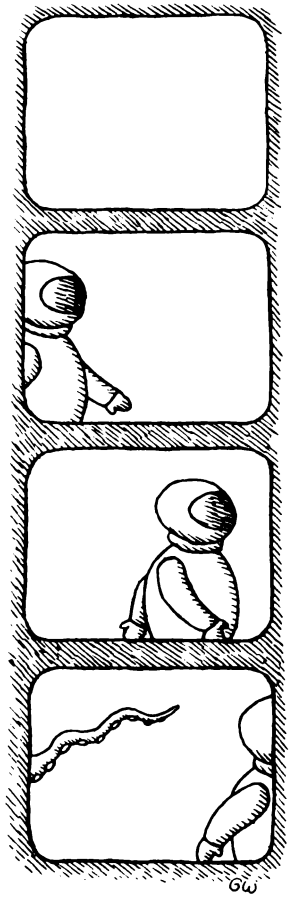
BAIRD SEARLES

FILMS

WELL, GENTLE READERS, my kindly editor has informed me that, due to circumstances beyond anyone's control, my monthly deadline has been moved forward. For future reference, this at times will make me sound just a bit more behind the times than usual; more immediately, for this column in particular, it left me with next to no time to find anything to review. So I have nothing new and exciting to tell you about—or even anything new and dull. There are two new horrors double-billing in the more squalid sections of town, but after last month's horror show round-up, I'm not sure either thee or me are up to any more.

But a *dea ex machina* appeared at the last moment. One of the hipper film houses in my neighborhood just this week did a big-screen revival of a film called *Cobra Woman.* This movie was a real mind blower for me at age 10, and its star, Maria Montez, a goddess; for my own amusement (and yours) I'd like to do a little *homage* piece in their honor.

To be brutally honest, it's a dreadful movie. It was a B film, and there's not an ounce of art or talent in it, aside from the



rather amazing slickness that even low budget films had in the 40s. But you younger readers bear in mind what we were being offered in that decade. The horror movie vogue of the 30s had about run its course; the sci-fi wave wasn't to begin until 1950. Mostly we were being offered war movies and sappy musicals supposed to keep up home front morale. If you craved fantasy of any sort, all you had were the Maria Montez-Jon Hall epics, all taking place in Polynesian or Moslem never-never lands, and most with at least a bit of overt fantasy. *Cobra Woman* is the most interesting because it is the most outrageously campy, and, I realize on seeing it again, basically a "lost civilization" story, very much akin to the classic examples of the genre as done by A. Merritt. There is a mysterious island that the natives fear to approach ("The Moon Pool"). There is the hero that blunders in to find an advanced civilization ("Dwellers in the Mirage"). There is the beautiful good girl and the beautiful bad girl, with a physical similarity ("Face in the Abyss")—in this case Montez is playing twins, which put rather a strain on her acting abilities, having to use two expressions rather than one throughout. The bad one is the high priestess of the Cobra religion, seemingly bent on sacrificing the entire population to the fire mountain. The good one is smuggled in by the Queen, her grandmother ("Are you the boss of the whole island?" says Sabu. "No, I'm just the Queen," she replies) to replace the bad one, and must dance the climactic ritual with the King Cobra (a bit of phallic symbolism here). The decor and costumes are marvelously eclectic; obviously a collection of all the exotic props lying around the lot. The result is sort of IndoPolynesian with a touch of Baghdad.

If it turns up, either at a theater or on TV, I suggest much popcorn and some friends with a sense of humor. It's a lot of fun.

Late, late show department. . .*Re* the above, I was thinking that, in general, most fantastic film has been dominated by sf and horror. "Pure" cinematic fantasy is extremely rare. Before WW II, the major literary subgenre of "pure" fantasy was the lost race theme. Since then, it has been variations on what is called sword and sorcery, which has not been really attempted in cinema, save for certain elements in "Camelot" and some of the Russian hero epics. But one night, very late, I found—would you believe—a sword and sorcery

movie on TV. It is called *The Undead*, and is not listed in any of my films-on-TV paperbacks, but TV Guide gives the date as 1957.

It gets off to an unprepossessing start with a contemporary psychohypnotist trying a Bridie Murphy bit on a prostitute. She reverts to a former incarnation who has been imprisoned for witchcraft in an unidentified medieval locale. Her future incarnation helps her to escape, and from then on things get pretty complex. This has been interfering with the past; if she is *not* executed at dawn, all her future lives will be mucked up. If she is, as originally fated, the future will be OK. Getting involved in all this are a handsome knight, a beautiful witch with a grotesque imp familiar, an old-hag type witch, the psychohypnotist who also travels to the past, and eventually Satan himself, raised at a pathetic and probably rather realistic witch's sabbath. Now all this is pretty sophisticated stuff for a movie; it most reminds me of a novelette from *Unknown Worlds*, that lamented magazine of intelligent, light fantasy. It looks like it was produced for about $2.98, but the script *is* intelligent, and *The Undead* joins other films such as "Creation of the Humanoids" and "Carnival of Souls" whose scripts deserved better productions than they got. If it shows up on your tube, take a look and try to see past the inept acting and cheap sets; there's an original movie under there.

Coming soon

Next month's feature stories include "Icarus Descending," suspenseful space sf from Gregory Benford, "Remnants of Things Past," time travel, but *different* by Robert F. Young, and "The City on the Sand," a moving and unusual story by George Alec Effinger. The April issue is on sale March 1. Also along soon will be new stories by Avram Davidson, Ron Goulart, Miriam Allen de Ford, Herbert Gold, Andre Norton, as well as the final Durdane novel by Jack Vance. Check out the coupon on page 96.

Here's a first rate story which does a lot with a deceptively simple idea: the first starship and one man's desire to be on it. Mr. Butler has been published in *Analog* and writes that "after trying the physics departments in several colleges, I decided that writing was what I wanted to do with my youth, and have been involved in the usual struggle for survival that comes with such a decision."

A Coffin In Egypt

by CHRIS G. BUTLER

"The clay parted over his head, lifting in rapture at the pulsing within, and tiny tremors of new life shook the land as deeply as a continent at birth. Heavy-leafed limbs bowed to shelter him from the midsummer sun as roots of great oaks and tendrils of weeds sought the small of his back and brought him up to lie on a field of damp grass. And the clay fell back to heal the scar in the side of this land.

"His eyes fluttered open and looked about slowly, first in amazement and then simple agreement. To the east and the west, to zenith and nadir, gleaning the substance of this, his existence, and after his gaze had coursed over the fields, seen the birds overhead and the worms in the soil, he knew. . .he was a man. And he stood."

"It's good, Martin, I like it very much." The lady teacher of Aesthetics Appreciation took the page from him.

"Thank you, Mrs. Whitlock."

"Have you been writing this sort of thing long?"

"No, ma'am."

"Well, it's certainly a fine beginning. Almost poetry, in fact. . .did you use Genesis as your model?"

"Not exactly. It just sounded right this way."

"I see," she smiled. "The original didn't?"

Amid the giggling from the others Martin answered, "It was all right, but just not too optimistic, you know?"

"No. What do you mean, Martin?"

He cleared his throat and spoke quietly. "I don't really know. I guess it's just that the Bible makes man out to be, well, some sort of a pet for God to scold or reward or do

anything he wants to. It says man doesn't have much to say about anything. . .you know, be good, be respectful, don't litter."

Mrs. Whitlock grinned and nodded. "But don't forget the Book of Job, when the Lord spoke out of a whirlwind and asked, 'Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the Earth?' "

Martin frowned. "That's what I mean, Mrs. Whitlock. I think man's more than that, that he can know those foundations someday."

For a moment Mrs. Whitlock stared at the intense young boy in front of her, puzzling at the depth of his concern. On a hunch she said, "Perhaps, Martin. You have a bit of the poet in you, I think. Have you ever thought of becoming a writer?"

"No ma'am, not really."

"Perhaps you should, Martin. What would you like to do, have you any idea?"

"Sort of." The boy looked to his hands self-consciously and lowered his voice. "I'd like to see the stars, someday."

Laughing broke out among his classmates, and Martin reddened, grinning awkwardly. Mrs. Whitlock stood and put her hand against his flushed cheek, smiling sadly, and then turned away to quiet the others.

Martin Abbot Renfrow awoke at 7:29 and quickly killed the Somno, set to begin waking him one minute later. Then he lay back, savoring his drowsiness, waiting for 8:00 and the beginning of a new day. It was quite pleasant, this being half awake and feeling his body trying to slide back to sleep, beckoned by half dreams on the threshold of his consciousness. Too bad it was a work day; a few hours of extra sleep would be mighty nice. . .

Moments later, it seemed, the room lights flashed on, and he realized groggily that it was eight, that he had drowsed away the half hour. Yawning, he sat up, scratched, and channeled the wall screen to Susan's room. Her bed was empty, already made. Coffee would be on in ten minutes, then—he pulled himself out of bed and hurried to the shower, still feeling tired.

Wash, shave, wake up the old mouth with the Agi-Kleaner, cologne, eye drops, nose drops, contacts, deodorant—Christ, he hated mornings. Maybe he shouldn't have cut off the Somno after all. Well, a little weariness wouldn't kill him. And it could have been worse, he reminded himself as he gauged the results in a mirror; he could have been born a woman.

Downstairs, Susan was set-

ting out breakfast for both of them, wearing a portable hair dryer. "You're late, dear," she murmured.

"Yeah," Martin answered, yawning. "I must have cut off the wonderwave in my sleep or something."

"Oh, Marty," she sighed and shook his head lightly by the ears. "That's the second time this week."

"Yeah," he grinned sheepishly. "I kind of like it."

"Well, like the dry farmers say, it's your consciousness."

"Yep."

"Do you want a little Methadrill in your coffee, then?" she asked, reaching into the spice rack for the tablets.

"No, I don't think so," Martin replied, looking down at his eggs. "I think I'll let the ol' cardiovascular system do its own chores today."

His wife glanced at him strangely but replaced the Methadrill bottle in the rack. "Suit yourself."

"I always do," he said sweetly, slicing up some bacon. The business of breakfast proceeded silently.

Most of the others stopped coming to school in time; some took years, others only months, but eventually, most of them left. The gulf between Martin and his friends grew as they settled down to farm the seas and the lands, while he became absorbed in fusion mechanics. Their world became one of growing farms and growing families and growing old. His was one of ever-deepening complexity, of understanding piece by piece the marvelous technology that gave others their freedom. In time, they were strangers.

The hardest part of it all was explaining it to himself. There were simply no tangible reasons for his efforts and his alienation, no desire for money or power or even prestige. All he knew was that deep inside he sensed his struggle was good and that it was not he who was being cheated but they, who settled for comfort when they could have been more.

So he studied on. At twenty-five, with his education barely half complete, he took his first wife and for a time was content. Eleanor was a good woman and his work went well, bringing him inexorably closer to a goal for which he had no name. It had all been proceeding so smoothly. . .

And then he heard rumors of a starship.

He'd dropped it all, every last piece, in a frantic scramble to qualify for the starcrew, to cram in the bits of knowledge such a man might need. He lost his health, but that didn't matter. He lost his job, but that

didn't matter. Eleanor left him, and that bothered him some. But getting turned down, being one of the thousands who got turned down. . .that mattered.

Two years passed by in a drunken haze before he could put his disappointment behind him and begin to learn again. It was another six years before he took Susan for his second wife, as he tried bit by bit to pick up the pieces. He almost succeeded.

Waiting for the uptown Cairo tube to suck him off to work, Martin listened woodenly to the news. Except for the development of a wheat strain that could grow on Mars and be used to feed the colonies there, little of interest was happening. Even the debate to automate the starship was still good for thirty seconds, though its design had been completed by computers nearly ten years ago and computer-directed construction machines had been building it up at the High Station for seven. Not to mention the fact that the twelve starcrew members had been in training ever since the conception of the mission. . .irritatedly Martin turned off the radio.

A distant hissing announced the approach of the train; waiting for the doors to slide open, Martin noticed that he was the only passenger, as usual. Seconds later the driverless train pulled to a stop and silver doors opened automatically, revealing a bright, empty interior. Martin entered, feeling curiously self-conscious. It was a feeling not unlike being alone in a large crowd.

Not relishing the sensation, he turned his radio back on and heard that the starship had finally been named by its crew, after years of consideration. The broadcast said she was to be called the Exodus. And one other thing. . .in four days, she would be launched.

Martin waited quietly until his heart stopped pounding blood into his temples, waited until his vision cleared and then sat down, trying to control slight tremors in his legs. His boredom was gone then. In its place was a sense of anguish he had known years before. . .the yearning for the stars was back.

The day passed slowly. He performed his tasks automatically, single-handedly managing Greater Cairo's ten-billion-watt power-desalinization plant with skill and efficiency. Reflex, ingrained from studies of magneto-hydrodynamics and plasma physics, monitored the thousand critical factors that kept a thermonuclear reaction in harness. But his mind never

showed up for work; his mind hadn't made it past the nine o'clock news.

That evening, Martin brought home a mass of tapes recorded off the plant's library hookup and loaded them into his wall screen. He was reviewing the starship drive, well into a fifth of bourbon, when Susan came home a few minutes later.

"Hello, darling," she called cheerily as she took off her coat.

"Hello," he called back.

"How was your day?"

"Wasn't it though," he muttered.

"What?" Susan entered his room, taking off her earrings and jewelry.

"What what?" Martin grinned.

"Darling," she murmured, sitting on the bed beside him and stroking his hair. "We aren't developing itsy-bitsy schizoid tendencies, are we? Hmmm?"

Martin kissed her on the nose and shook his head. "More like manic, sweet-ums."

"Oh, well. . .for a moment there I was worried."

"So take two aspirin and go to bed. With me," he added, handing her his glass of bourbon.

"You men are all alike," she replied petulantly, pushing away the liquor and ignoring his hands as they began to undress her. Then she noticed that the wall screen was on and stared at it, not comprehending the technical drawing. "What's that, Martin?"

"What's what?" he muttered, trying not to rip the self-adhesive fabric.

"Let's not start that again."

"Start what again?" The seam came loose, and he pulled the top of the pantsuit off her, snagging her necklace.

"Will you wait a minute, butterfingers? What is that on the wall screen?"

"That? Just a starship drive, nothing to get upset about." Martin waited patiently for her to stand so he could get the rest of her clothes off.

"Why are you studying starship drives?" she continued, staying firmly seated on the edge of the bed.

"Machines fascinate me," he muttered, gazing fixedly at her pelvis and waiting for her to take the hint. "They're so tractable."

After a moment of looking thoughtfully at the screen, she turned to him seriously and murmured, "Martin, love, you're an idiot."

"I suppose."

Leaving him to mull over the significance of her appraisal, she stood and slipped out of her clothes.

An hour later he was alone again, feeling strangely dissatisfied and wondering if he was coming down with something. The sounds of his wife typing up case reports in the living room bothered him too, and shouldn't have. The intelligent thing to do would be to take a tranquilizer and get some extra sleep so he'd be rested in the morning. Instead he poured himself some more bourbon and flicked the screen back on.

The eyes of an engineer perused the technical drawing methodically. . .educated eyes considering the product of a computer, but a computer designed by intellects like his own. And yet his mind's eye wasn't seeing a complex diagram of the most powerful propulsion device ever developed. . .Martin was seeing beyond the wall into the depths of wonder, and of joy.

To reach the stars—to ride a stream of frantic matter, torn by the blast of a fusion reactor into bits of plasma seeking escape from that hellish inferno, battering thousands of tons of alloy and a few pounds of flesh at insanely mounting speeds outward, beyond the planets for the first time. . .that was going to be some ride.

"Martin?"

He blinked and suddenly realized that his wife was sitting beside him. Her warm palm went against his forehead, and he shivered involuntarily, feeling a little woozy.

"Darling, what's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," he grinned ingenuously, upset at having been interrupted. "Is it time for beddy-bye already?"

His sarcasm confused her and she stood to go. "You're obviously under some kind of strain, Martin. Try to get some rest and maybe we can talk about it in the morning."

"Yes, dear," he replied saccharinely, surprising even himself with the bitterness his voice held.

She walked quickly to the door after turning off his wall screen. "One other thing," she said, pausing at the hallway. "Use the Somno tonight. You won't want a hangover in the morning."

"I won't want a hangover in the morning," Martin agreed agreeably.

"Use the Somno, Martin."

"For the hangover."

"That's right. Get some sleep now."

"Goodnight, pet." As the door slid quietly shut, he grinned and flicked the screen back on. For several minutes he gazed at the drawing, but the mood was gone, the reverie upset beyond recovery. He sighed and flipped the screen off again, took a last sip of bourbon and then killed the

lights. To the steady clicking of Mrs. Martin Abbot Renfrow at her electric typewriter and to the dull, warm red light of his Bedside Somnolator Mark IV with automatic recycle and genuine teak veneer, Martin settled to sleep.

Without opening his eyes, Martin knew it was 8:00. He felt well rested, wanting no more and no less sleep than he'd had. There were no thoughts or half dreams cluttering up his consciousness, wanting him to lie around and play with them. Martin was ready for a new day. . .the Somno had done its job.

"Good old Mark IV," he mumbled, patting its wood-bedecked waveform synthesizer affectionately. As he rolled out of bed, the lights flashed on. Life was full of surprises.

Over breakfast, Susan tried to find some phenomenon her wifely mind could accept as the cause of her spouse's peculiar behavior. Being a practicing neurobiologist, her efforts were pretty thorough.

"No drugs? No Halozine or Methadrill or even a little bad Librium?"

"None," Martin assured her, sipping his coffee. "Maybe the Somno's breaking down. Maybe it's destroying my mind. . ." he muttered, widening his eyes.

"Don't be so dramatic, darling, it doesn't help. You know a Somno just suppresses minor bad dreams and induces sleep. It can't induce the sort of anxiety you're suffering."

"I don't know," he said, lowering his voice. "I've heard rumors, strange rumors. . ."

"Martin, stop that. Please cooperate. I only want to help."

"Yes, dear."

His wife sat across the table fidgeting with her food, openly fighting to maintain her composure. "You know, Martin, neither one of us benefits from the exasperation this causes."

"Yes, dear."

"I mean it, really. Why are you so hard on us, darling? On both of us?"

"Yes, dear."

"Oh, damn you," she muttered and turned away.

"What, dear?"

"I said, 'Damn you,' " she answered fiercely.

"Oh. That's what I thought you said," he said evenly.

"You son of a bitch."

"Pass the sugar, would you, sugar?" he asked and then grinned, pleased with his wit.

"You're a pain in the ass, Martin, you truly are."

"No sugar?"

She pushed the sugar across to him and watched as he sprinkled it generously on his cereal. "You won't let me reach you?" she pleaded. "None of this gets through to you?"

Martin smiled and murmured soothingly, "All of it gets to me, dear."

There were times when dry farming had definite appeal. Sitting in front of the display, running routine checks on deuterium feeds, flux strengths and a thousand other items in this glorified tea kettle, Martin wondered if maybe a dry farm wouldn't be more challenging.

The minutes hummed away steadily, ignoring him, just as a lot of days had lately. And next year, if he passed the requisite exams, he would graduate to a Tech 12 status and to an even bigger display panel at an even bigger station, maybe even an off-planet rig. If he kept at his books and if he used his three-hour study break wisely, that is, and he probably would since it beat the pants off watching this display board.

The funny thing about it all was that he was a success. There weren't ten thousand people in the whole world as well trained in fusion mechanics as he was, and at 40 he was still going strong. In just another ten years he would have learned all they had to teach him and then. . . and then. . .

And then what? They hadn't told him that yet. Just be patient, though, it's only ten more years. Martin would have laughed if all the steady lights and busy meters in front of him hadn't made humor seem a bit absurd. Instead he punched the only button he felt any affinity for and was rewarded with a steaming cup of coffee.

An hour later he was preparing to study, having switched control over to the plant's computer for the next three hours. As he reached for the day's text cartridge, the starship came to mind and he hesitated. A satisfying twinge of guilt swept through him, and smirking, Martin typed a call to the library circuits and settled back in his chair. The wall screen lit brightly with the faces of the starcrew, and the hours began to pass by unnoticed as he read the dossiers on Rodericks and Bulyanin, the stardrive technicians, puzzling that they'd been chosen over him.

That night, sitting home with a double bourbon in front of his screen, Martin waited impatiently for a progress report on the preparation of the Exodus. The starcrew dossiers hadn't done much to calm him.

In just two days. . .two days. . .the craft would begin its voyage of a thousand years to the near stars, and he had once had a chance to be on it. Martin drained his glass quickly and poured a refill.

Suddenly the screen was

filled with the loading of twelve stark white capsules, each twice the size of a man, into an orbital shuttle at Cape Kennedy. Each was void of any marking save the name of the crewman who would spend the next hundred years inside in deep sleep, alive only to the cryogenic apparatus that maintained that sleep. A Somno to end all Somnos. . .

The face of each man was superimposed on his capsule as it was loaded, and an emotional commentator called off the names. . .Kassim, Johnson, Bulyanin, Rodericks. . . Rodericks. . .Rodericks. . .The screen blurred for a moment, and Martin reached for the controls, just a little too drunk to realize right away that his eyes were tearing.

That was the moment Susan chose to enter. He had to turn away from her to keep her from seeing the tears, embarrassed to be losing control this way, and pretending to adjust the screen, he fought for self-control. And then he felt her gently touch his shoulders, sensed the hesitation in her gesture, and he pulled her to him, bringing his eyes around to face hers. She held him wordlessly, not comprehending his sorrow but trying to share in it. In her arms, to the sonorous voice of the newscaster describing the voyage of the Exodus for the hundredth time, Martin sniffled quietly, feeling uncomfortably foolish.

When the broadcast ended, Susan turned off the screen and dabbed at his eyes with her blouse as he lay on the bed, staring numbly at the ceiling. Like a mothering cat she cleansed him, and when she was satisfied, she lay beside him and stroked his hair.

"Is that what's been bothering you, Martin? The starship?" He nodded wearily and slipped his arm under her shoulder. "Is it something you can tell me about?" she asked quietly.

"I don't know," he replied evenly. "I don't know if I can tell myself."

"Please try," she murmured.

"OK," he said and coughed to get the waver out of his throat. "Well, it's like this. It's like the starship is what we've been building up to for a million years now, you understand? Twelve of us are going to ride the Exodus into a whole new existence, to worlds and concepts none of us can even guess at. It's as big a step as climbing out of the trees was a million years ago."

"Darling," she interrupted softly. "We never lived in trees. . ."

Martin glanced at her and retorted, "I know that, Susan, it's just a figure of speech."

"I'm sorry."

"OK. So it's all coming to a

head, it's all about to happen. . ."

"And you don't feel a part of it?"

"Exactly. I'm not a part of it. I could be, I think I'm qualified to be, but I'm not a part of it."

"Martin," she purred, kissing him on the neck, "do you ever think how lonely those twelve men are going to be?"

"Yes, of course, but have you the faintest inkling of what may be waiting for them out there? Other races, other sciences. . .whole new existences and states of mind!"

"Perhaps. But what if they find just different-colored suns and dead planets, like the moon?"

"We have to take that chance, Susan, and we'll always have to! It was cold up in those trees."

"But it's warm now, isn't it?" she smiled.

He looked at her strangely, then shook his head. "I knew you wouldn't understand."

"Are you sure it's me who doesn't understand?" she asked quietly, looking calmly into his eyes.

Her tone threw him, and in the moment that she pressed herself to him, he felt doubt. "Just a second," he mumbled and trotted to the visiphone in the living room. Not knowing quite what he had in mind, he called the plant's computer and got permission to take the next week off.

In the morning he woke early and was surprised to find Susan sleeping beside him; she must have come in the night. Gazing at her tranquil face, he understood how beautiful she was and how much she loved him. As quietly as possible, he got out of bed and went to the bathroom to take a long shower and fight the temptation to stay there with his wife. For once the water felt good and he let himself soak in it.

When he finished in the bathroom, he put his shaver and Agi-Kleaner in a suitcase along with some clothes. Dressing quickly, he carried his shoes and the suitcase to the door and then tiptoed back to the bed. Susan woke immediately when he kissed her.

"Ummm," she smiled and sat up, stretching. "Good morning."

"Good morning."

The suitcase by the door caught her eye and she looked at it curiously. "You're running away from home?"

Martin reddened and murmured soothingly, "No, nothing like that. I'm going to watch the starship leave, is all."

"Is all," she echoed, stroking his face. "You didn't shave very well, darling."

"I was in a hurry."

Forcing a smile, she nodded and said, "I know. Before you go, look in the refrigerator, all right?"

"Sure. Why?"

Looking down at herself and then drawing the sheets up to her neck, she said wistfully, "I made some lunch for you last night. . ."

He kissed the nape of her neck awkwardly and hurried out of the bedroom.

Fare to the High Station was exorbitant, but then Tech 11's were notoriously overpaid anyway. After a six-hour wait for a seat and clearance, Martin finally caught a ride up on one of the shuttles. When he arrived, the High Station was swarming with newsmen and visitors like himself. The observation deck had a festive air about it, and those who hadn't been nauseous during the ride up from earth were drinking and drugging enthusiastically, though the actual launch was still some twenty hours off.

Somehow it all struck Martin as a shade irreverent; for mankind's finest hour, it bore a curious resemblance to a high-flying debauchery. Disgusted, Martin left the bright faces and went to catch a glimpse of the starcrew taking their final physicals.

He got more than a glimpse. Windows had been erected and microphones installed so that the dignitaries could hear and watch the last rites. Newsmen were everywhere, photographing anything, determined not to let the most insignificant fart of these twelve gentlemen go unrecorded in the annals of history. One of them even stopped Martin for an interview.

After making clear what he wanted to know, the newsman handed Martin a microphone and began filming his comments with a hand camera.

"Ready, Mr. Renfrow?"

"Yep."

"OK, here we go. . .five, four, three, two. . .would you please introduce yourself, sir."

"My name is Martin A. Renfrow and I'm manager of the Cairo Desalinization and Power Plant. My status is Tech 11 and I'm happily married to Susan Johns Renfrow, my second wife. Hi out there, Susan," he grinned and waved.

"Ahh, that's fine, Mr. Renfrow, thanks. Now would you please tell our viewers what your general impression is, standing here with hundreds of other dignitaries awaiting the launch of the first starship?"

"Certainly," Martin grinned good-naturedly and clearing his throat, he let out a fine, loud, "Mooooooo." When the newsman snatched back the microphone, Martin knew he said the

wrong thing. Well, that was show biz. . .

Several hours later, walking in the relative privacy of the Embarkation Bay, he was feeling seriously depressed. The rising jubilance of the crowd as the hour approached served only to sicken him. It was all so inane! To them the Exodus was an incomprehensible parading of technology, an attainment of impressive but meaningless degree. To him, it was commencement. Damn, if they'd just had the sense to break that first camera back in the Apollo days. . .

Something caught his eye and he paused in his maunderings. One of the rooms was open that had been locked the last time he passed this way. Looking closer, he saw that the door had been forced open. Burglars? Saboteurs? He grinned, knowing it was more likely a lady needing a powder room in a hurry, or a couple needing a little quick privacy. Sure enough, there was a woman's compact just inside the door. He entered, put it in his pocket, and froze.

Inside were the twelve white capsules, waiting to be powered up and receive their crewmen. Without hesitation, Martin closed the door behind him and came closer, his heart beginning to pound. There, third from the left, was one marked "Rodericks." He gazed at it in awe. How close the name was to Renfrow, he thought numbly, how unfairly close. He touched it gingerly, saw that his sweat came off on it and used his jacket to clean off the dampness, as if he profaned it. Down deep inside he began to ache, and an idea came to him.

For just the briefest of moments, not allowing himself to think, Martin moved to the automatic latches on the capsule and activated them. His heart pounded into his throat as he gazed in, and in his excitement his mind could hold only one thought, to climb in and close the lid and not climb out until the Exodus had achieved orbit around a Centauri sun. His hands trembled on the edge of the capsule; not until his foot was actually lifting off the ground did he realize what he was doing.

Martin closed the lid and stepped back, away, quickly. He knew as only an engineer could know that it was no good this way. The capsule had been built for another and would require millions to be made suitable for him. And, much as he might like to think otherwise, he needed the years of training that Rodericks had gone through to earn this trip. Reluctantly he turned to leave—and stopped himself.

To come this close and do

nothing? No, there had to be some way of commemorating it, of sending a taste of Martin Abbot Renfrow out to the stars. What, what. . .looking about frantically, he saw a screwdriver and picked it up. Feeling ecstatic and just a bit like an idiot, Martin used the screwdriver to carve his initials and the date on the bottom of Rodericks' capsule. In a final fit of inspiration, he also inscribed:
"Roses are red,
Violets are blue,
If this thing breaks,
I hope they sue."

Hurriedly replacing the screwdriver, he headed for the door, feeling like a snotty-nosed kid. Too bad he hadn't had time to wax lyrical; it was a humble beginning for universal poetry.

As he was stepping into the corridor, two white-smocked technicians spotted him, and five minutes later he was bleeding slightly from the mouth and nose, answering questions for the benefit of the High Station manager.

"But I tell you, I didn't break the lock, somebody else did," he mumbled, having difficulty enunciating properly with a rapidly swelling jaw. "Look," he offered, reaching into his pocket, "here's a compact I found in the room. Some woman must have forced her way in or something."

The manager looked at him sternly. "Perhaps. . .but that doesn't explain why you were in there."

"I was curious," he replied, shifting his weight nervously from foot to foot.

"Perhaps. . .and perhaps not."

"Look, if you don't believe me, check it out. There must be fingerprints, right?"

"Perhaps. . .and perhaps not," the manager muttered, twiddling a pencil in his fingers.

Martin felt anger rising in him and fought it. The silence grew as the two stared at each other, flanked by the technicians who'd escorted Martin to the office. "Look, dammit, what do you expect when you let a bunch of drunks wander loose inside a goddamn space station?"

The manager's eyes narrowed. "I believe that's my concern."

Martin stared back and muttered, "Perhaps. . .and. . ." but before he could finish the phrase, the administrator was on his feet waving a fist and shouting at him.

"Out! I want you out of my office and off my station and out of my life immediately! There's a shuttle leaving in ten minutes and you better be on it, you miserable ground-pounder, you just damn well better be on it!"

Martin glared back angrily and nodded. "That suits me just fine."

"Now get out of my office. Get out, get out, get out. . ."

Martin stalked out indignantly. Not until he was headed Earthside on the decelerating shuttlecraft did he realize that the manager had probably been drunk himself.

His wife was sitting alone in the living room, an open bottle of Martin's bourbon in front of her with a bowl of ice cubes. When he walked in she seemed surprised and started to rise, then restrained herself. In a calm voice she asked finally, "Are you home?"

Martin sat beside her, pouring himself a drink. "No. Not yet."

"Oh," she replied in a hushed voice and looked to her drink.

After a bit, Martin told her, "They threw me off the High Station for snooping. I can't be there for the launch." He refilled his drink; Susan was respectfully silent. "Hey," he grinned, looking at the far wall, "did I ever tell you I applied for the crew? Ten years or so ago?"

"No," she murmured. "I thought it might be something like that."

"Yeah, well, you were right. You're a very intelligent woman, Susan," he said magnanimously. "You don't miss much."

"Please don't, Martin," she pleaded softly. "I'm very sorry for you, sorry that this day had to come, but, darling, you must have known it was coming too. Please don't be hard on us."

"Sure, sure," he muttered, then clenched his teeth. "But I don't even get to see the launch. . ."

"We have wall screens," she offered.

"Yeah, right." Martin swirled his drink about, smiling bitterly as the ice cubes clinked against the glass. "In the comfort of my own bedroom, with plenty of good booze and even my own wife to get excited with and after the launch. . ."

"Please," she implored, touching his hand.

He stood, straightened, and nodded curtly. "You're right, Susan, absolutely right." Picking up the bottle, he walked to the door and called over his shoulder, "I'm going down to the office, dear. Keep dinner warm, will you?"

Around him power surged into being by the millions upon millions of watts as the sea yielded up her substance, her precious metals and her organic debris, even her sister deuterium as she became fresh water to nourish a flowering desert.

Critical measurings and meterings, computer-controlled and monitored, kept the vast energy of a thermonuclear furnace in precise, usable forms, a monstrous genie in a frail magnetic bottle. Yet to Martin's ears it was all simply a soft unwavering hum, to his eyes a gentle cyclical flickering of lights on a display board. The principles he knew, the sounds and lights he comprehended fully, but the wonder of it all had vanished somewhere down the line. In the midst of it all, he saw only the starship on his room screen, awaiting its payload.

A deep-space cargo shuttle, little more than a huge box with thrusters, was gently maneuvering near the open Embarkation Bay, positioning itself to receive the twelve capsules. The scene was reminiscent of an earlier one, with one significant difference—this time there were twelve men inside about to take the most incredible nap in the history of man. Martin took a long drink and zoomed the screen in on the loading.

One by one the capsules were guided to the shuttle by a space-suited color guard. No less than the Secretary of the United Nations solemnly intoned the names of each crewman and his country as the loading proceeded. When Martin heard "Rodericks," he set the screen on highest magnification.

The image blurred, but he was able to make out the name on the top of the casket. But what of the bottom? He turned to another channel, found one covering the event from a different angle and zoomed in again. The scrawls were still there, too fuzzy to read but definitely there—they hadn't been found. Martin grinned and sat back, pleased. If they'd found those initials, it would have meant trouble, but as it was. . .he toasted himself and the near-sighted press.

Moments later the shuttle was burning slowly out towards the Exodus, carrying her precious cargo, a crew of technicians and a lone cameraman. The scene shifted and suddenly the starship was filling the screen. Though he'd seen a thousand pictures of it and a hundred programs on it, the massive vessel sent a shiver through his body. For the first time, the reality of this enormous undertaking was truly upon him; he knew a moment of fear. A journey of a thousand years. . .

The shuttle arrived and the technicians began the final loading; the capsules were handled by men for the last time. Martin felt a touch of heat, of fever rising in him and took a long pull of liquor to settle his stomach. The view on the screen shifted quickly as the

cameraman maneuvered in free fall, intent on not missing a single detail. One by one the capsules were loaded into the bay of the Exodus, and then came Rodericks. . .

Martin swallowed bourbon down both lungs and coughed, straining to see what he thought he'd seen, as blood pounded to his temple and eyes. There were no markings! Not on the bottom, anyway. Dribbling liquor down his face, Martin zoomed in on the underside, bruising his fingers as he punched the control buttons. There were no markings, none at all!

For some seconds his mind reeled numbly in a miasma of confusion and near-panic, incapable of accepting or understanding what was transpiring before him on the screen and simultaneously 20-odd thousand miles overhead. No markings? No markings: Who, what. . .what were they trying to pull. . .think, Renfrow, think. . .

Slowly the mind of a trained engineer began to dominate and override that of an inebriated spectator. There had to be an explanation, a simple precise answer. OK, Tech 11, find it. . .

Maybe he was seeing things. No, just the opposite, he wasn't seeing things because there were none to be seen on the bottom of that capsule. His eyesight he could reasonably trust, and, besides, historical tapes would soon be available to check what he thought he'd seen, so that could be proven. OK, then, perhaps they'd polished the capsule during the shuttle ride; perhaps they had a machine shop tucked away inside and a crew of machinists who could perform such a feat in the few minutes the shuttling had required. Somehow he doubted that one, too. Conclusion—it wasn't the same capsule he'd seen loaded.

Impossible. If that wasn't the same capsule, then Rodericks hadn't been loaded into the starship. And Rodericks was a vital member of the crew, at least as vital as any of the others; yet his capsule hadn't been loaded. . .a switch? A last minute substitute was being sent in his place? Why? Rodericks was trained, competent, perfect for the mission. There was just no reason to pull a secret switch, short of there being some fantastic plot full of intrigue and. . .and. . .

Panic began to rise in him again as the ghost of an answer began to wail in his brain. Martin stood as best he could and walked to the plant's control panel, looking at all the lights winking at him, performing their little tricks for him. The answer was there. He reached out a well-trained index

finger to the deuterium pressure control and noticed that the finger was trembling. The curse of the drinking man. . .

He slid the control up to maximum, feeling a strange nothingness throughout his body, a hollowness in spite of this being a thing he'd never done before, and then he began sliding others. Soon, very soon, the lights weren't winking at him any more. Rather, they were glaring at him, glaring harsh and bright and red, and meter needles were promising to bend as they pegged themselves off the scales.

Calmly Martin sat and watched, intrigued. He had forgotten most of what he knew about the yields of uncontrolled thermonuclear reactions but was sure that the plant was capable of a fine performance. A hundred megatons, surely; peculiarly, the thought pleased him. Machines could be lots of fun.

Abruptly a siren went off, shrieking into the distance. It was the standard emergency siren, calling for a little help in ironing out a plant difficulty. In a few seconds the needles began to slide back to normal as the red lights dimmed and went out, replaced by gentle pretty ones. Without touching it, Martin was sure the control panel was inoperative now, locked out by the plant computer in an automatic override. Around him, in spite of him, the plant settled down to a quiet production of power and fresh water.

Smiling at his little joke, Martin picked his coat off the wall and his bottle off the desk and walked out into the desert. Night was coming; the cooling air felt good as he slipped on the coat and sat against a wall, sipping and watching the sunset and enjoying it all. It was a fine joke, truly the best he'd ever heard. The joke was his life.

A Tech 11 didn't run the Greater Cairo Thermonuclear Power and Desalinization Plant. . .A Honeywell Mark 16 did and Tech 11's got to watch. It made sense, too, Martin realized abruptly. . .a Mark 16 reacted in nanoseconds, thought in nanoseconds, even learned in nanoseconds. And how long had he been studying now to master a fraction of what the computer knew. . . how many decades?

Still, he was familiar with the capacities of computers; that the Cairo plant was run by one was no tremendous revelation, though the deception bothered him some. What he'd learned today, what he'd finally understood, had come from the Exodus, not a Mark 16. Martin looked up. The starship would be firing soon—maybe he'd see its bright ionic tail.

Was it Alan Shepard, back in the beginnings of spaceflight, who'd landed a frail eggshell of a craft on the lunar surface, and maintained a perfect 72 pulse during the entire descent? And Sergeii Yemeroff, the Russian cosmonaut stranded in lunar orbit with no hope of return, who of his own accord had read Lenin and Yevtushenko to a billion earthbound listeners and then, for the few minutes left to him, had destroyed all his radio gear except the biosensory transmitters?

Then it had been called courage, but now Martin knew it to be another virtue—the ability of man to mimic his machines. But it was a limited virtue, because man would never be able to think in nanoseconds. So man had tried, and tried valiantly with all his spirit to mold himself into the guise of his creations, and now Martin knew that man had failed. And the stars were forfeit to him. . .his machines would fly the mission instead, because they were best suited to it. Hell, they'd even designed the damn thing.

Martin laughed then and drank a quiet toast to the feeble creatures of flesh and hope who were once again his brothers. Mankind's finest hour, the promise of destiny upon him, and in that last moment the few who understood man's destiny had pulled a little sleight of hand to keep that hope alive. Nobody would be the wiser for a thousand years. . .

In the distance he heard a police hovercraft approaching, a dust storm rising in its wake as the vehicle sped to the plant's aid. A man had tampered with the machinery, it seemed. Again Martin laughed, and as he drained the bottle, a memory came back to him, something the Sage had said. . .a nursery rhyme to comfort a child's fears of the unknown. . .

"The work is done, how no one can see,
This way is best for the power to be."

Something like that, anyway. Give the man a cigar.

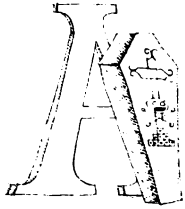
Smiling sadly, he stood and wandered out to greet the police, to be taken home to Susan, perhaps to be scolded. Martin chuckled and then stumbled to his knees in the soft cooling sand. He was a little drunk, he realized.

". . .Man at his birth is supple and weak, at his death firm and strong. So it is with all things. . ." Verse LXXVI, the *T'ao Teh Ching.*

". . .and they embalmed him, and he was laid in a coffin in Egypt." Genesis 50:25. . .the last words. Now commences the Book of Exodus. □

The Zombie Butler

by GAHAN WILSON



A middle-aged couple by the name of Harrison, vacationing on the island of Haiti, were encouraged by their hired guide to attend a voodoo meeting. They accepted, after some hesitation, and that evening they were jeeped skillfully up the bejungled side of a mountain to a circular hut built on its peak. Their guide escorted them inside the hut and they sat, not without trepidation, on a bench by the wall.

Following a series of orgiastic dances, all done to deafening thumps of gigantic drums and the shrill keening of enthusiastically-blown whistles, a simple pine coffin was carried into the room and placed on the center of the floor. As the Harrisons watched with widening mouths, a voodoo priest made odd designs on the coffin's lid in rooster blood and dashed out the brains of several small goats on its corners, all the time chanting rhythmically in a deep, hypnotic voice which reminded Mr. Harrison irresistibly of Paul Robeson.

Suddenly, with a horrid groaning of wood, the lid of the coffin swung open and an immense black, his huge eyes staring blankly ahead, sat up from within the coffin's depths, braced his huge hands on its sides, and stood. The guide, in whispers, explained to the Harrisons that they had just seen the creation of a zombie, a walking dead man who would obey its master's every order without hesitation and work night and day, inexhaustibly, at any given task.

"They make," concluded the guide, "Excellent servants, of course."

"He's just what we've been looking for," said Mrs. Harrison firmly. "Especially that part about no back talk. They've gotten so uppity where we come from."

A discreet signal on the part of the guide brought the voodoo priest over to the Harrisons' bench, and, after a few moments' discussion and the signing of two American Express Travelers Checks by Mr. Harrison, the zombie was theirs.

Back in Cleveland, the Harrisons' new domestic created quite a stir. The other matrons

of the town disguised their envy with varying degrees of success while the menfolk congratulated Mr. Harrison openly and speculated on the economic implications of his find.

As time passed, however, the Harrisons noticed a definite drawback to their buy. Although he walked, the zombie was, after all, dead, and the processes of corruption attendant to death, while undeniably slowed by the voodoo priest's machinations, were proceeding along the usual lines. The general effect was increasingly unpleasant, and soon the Harrisons found their social functions very sparsely attended.

"Something simply must be done," said Mrs. Harrison.

Mr. Harrison, after a little cogitation, hired the city's leading undertaker and that worthy, after several false starts, managed to make the butler temporarily presentable, if one managed to ignore the constant perfume of formaldehyde; but, in the long run, his ministrations proved of no avail. If anything, reflected Mr. Harrison somberly, they added a new note of ghastliness to the zombie's steady decay.

"Ship him back where he came from," Mrs. Harrison instructed her husband, and he tried; but the health authorities, now fully aware of the zombie's status, informed him that no corpse could be shipped anywhere, nor so much as carried across the street, without a proper death certificate; and, since the Harrisons had neglected to try to obtain one back in Haiti, the zombie was theirs, forevermore.

As they grew older and more horror-stricken, the zombie served them selflessly, servile and gelatinous, and when they died it still crawled oozingly about the house, dusting the legs of the tables and chairs, and cleaning its trail from the carpets.

MORAL: *A slave's chains are heavy at both ends.*

Waldo Carlton Wright is a full time freelance writer whose articles and stories of the outdoors have appeared in *Yankee, Legion* and *Esquire.* He lives on thirteen acres in the wilderness of Northeast Pennsylvania, with his artist wife.

Spirit of the White Deer

by WALDO CARLTON WRIGHT

FROM THE FIRST DAY HE walked into the inn, Karin White Feather had known that someday the White Deer would come out into the North Woods and take back her strange husband.

When David first came into her life, she had been working for the old man. Ever since her Eskimo grandmother had died. It wasn't much of an inn, just a large clapboard shack with rooms upstairs for the hunters.

Karin cooked the meals. Once a month when the lumberjacks came down after payday, the old man had white girls flown in for all kinds of strange goings on, drinking, dancing on the slab floor with a fiddler and one of the lumbermen playing the concertina.

These times she hid in the kitchen, or after meals in her room back under the eaves. They were like animals, only worse, these grizzled men and the shameless white girls who showed their legs and laughed high and shrill like loons.

Mostly she and the old man lived there alone. He had once been a circuit-rider minister carrying a Bible and traveling the back country missions. But when he got too old to ride, he had bought this old inn, to make a living. Having the girls fly in for paydays was the lumberjacks' idea of fun. The old man needed the extra money just to buy food and medicine for his cough.

One lonely afternoon while she was working at the inn, a strange man in a faded army uniform came in. He set a torn flight bag on the floor by the chair and walked to the bar.

From her first sight of him Karin wondered about his scared look. It reminded her of the way a deer turns its head to catch the whiff of a hunter before it bounds off into the bush to clear a fallen log in one leap.

Something about the tired way this skinny one with his long hair leaned against the bar made him different from the lumbermen or the pale-faced hunters who flew up for the moose season.

"Just coffee," he said when she slid out a glass and pushed the whiskey bottle within reach. "I never touch the stuff."

She went into the kitchen and brought out the pot, filled his cup.

"Some soup?" she asked watching the way he stirred in the sugar and dripped the condensed milk from the can. He shook his head.

"I haven't a dime."

She felt sorry for him, a hungry stranger. She brought him a bowl of thick bean soup and hard biscuits from the kitchen. While he ate he kept looking up as she pretended to wipe whiskey stains from the bar.

"You from around here?" he asked when she refilled his coffee cup for the third time.

"Farther up," she said, now wanting him to trust her. "In Hidden Valley this side of Yellow Knife."

"You're part Indian, aren't you?" he asked.

"My grandmother was Eskimo." She had never told anyone that, or about the mother who had deserted her to run off with a hunter, leaving her with her grandmother.

"You got a man?" His question startled her. She shook her head, feeling the warm blood surging up her neck as if the White Deer were whispering to her, his muzzle tickling her ears. This is your man, White Feather.

"You got any money?" he asked, motioned her to sit on the stool beside him. She looked around. The old man was back in the kitchen. She heard him coughing and the pans rattling.

"Three hundred dollars, most." She wondered why she suddenly felt here was the one she could slave for all her life, even if he might beat her the way the lumberjacks beat up the white girls the next morning.

"Let's go back where your folks lived." That was how he put it. Direct, with no questions about how she had managed to put aside that much money, working for the old man in the kitchen, not sleeping with lumberjacks. Most hunters were good tippers, winking at her

after their meal, nodding upstairs. But she never had done that bad thing.

They found the cabin where her grandmother died, up the valley from the Indian reservation, along the trail she picked out through the bush. Here they lived for thirteen years, like hermits. David trapped. She managed with the corn patch, the few rows of potatoes and turnips raised during the short months of summer with the black flies.

David was part Indian himself, he told her later. He could stalk a deer, bring it down with one neat shafted arrow. Winters he ran his trapping lines. Springs he would send her down the path, the stiff hides strapped to her back, with a band around her forehead. She half ran, half shuffled across the ridge along the Indian trail to the trading post.

She often wondered, after the second boy was born, why her husband never ventured down the path. It's hard for me to walk that far, he would say. But she knew that was not the truth. He never told her anything about his past.

"You should go to the hospital at Yellow Knife," she kept telling him. "You got something inside your gut. I feel it when you press against me in the night."

"It's nothing, just a little shrapnel."

She never asked him what shrapnel was or how he came to get it inside him. She often wondered whether in time the boys too would go far away and come back with metal inside them, to make them limp home from the trap lines, like hurt animals.

By the time Tom, the older boy, was twelve, he too had learned how to stalk a deer and send a spinning arrow. His brother Jim would go with Tom on these hunts. Their father would stay behind in the shed, scraping the fur off the winter hides, then packing them for her to carry to the trading post.

"Your man should tote them himself," Mr. Henderson at the post told her every time she would unsling the pack from her back and lay the salted pelts out on the floor to be counted.

"He's too busy." David had told her to say that if anyone in the village asked her about him and why he didn't bring in the hides himself, the way the other trappers did.

"Top grade," Mr. Henderson would say as he leafed through the hides. "I figure I could pay seventy dollars for the lot."

David had told her to shake her head at the first offer like a stupid squaw. Make him pay double his first offer, he cautioned her, so you can bring

back enough flour, bacon and molasses to last us. And get whatever else the boys need.

One time when Mr. Henderson had tripled his first offer for fifty-two gray fox hides, she had told him about the boys and how they were taking over more of the trapping. Her man found it harder to keep the trap lines baited and set along the upper lake.

"How old are your boys?" Mr. Henderson had asked. He had kindly eyes like a doe, not lumberman squinting eyes but wide and somehow making you want to tell him things, things she wouldn't tell anyone, not even David.

When she told him their ages, he whistled softly to himself and shook his head. "They ought to be in school, Karin White Feather," he said. "There's a mission school in Yellow Knife. They could live there summers, learn some trade."

"They have a trade," she said, not wanting the boys taken away, to become like the lumbermen, selfish, greedy animals. She wanted them to grow up in the woods, feel this was their home. Never to know white women or do the bad things the lumbermen did, drinking, sleeping with any female they could drag to bed with them.

When she got back to the cabin, she told David what Mr. Henderson had said about the boys and sending them to the mission school.

"As long as I'm alive, I need them here," he said, counting the money she had received for the pelts.

"Mr. Henderson said if the Mounties found out, they would come and take the boys away." She felt he should know that.

"You did wrong in blabbing about our boys." He grabbed up the provisions, set off to pack them away in the shed, safe from the bears. White Feather threw herself on the bed in the back room and cried. She couldn't bear her husband scolding her. Looking deep into the kind eyes of Mr. Henderson, she had been proud to tell him of her sons. They should go to school, learn something.

David was such a smart man. He ran the household better than the old man had run the inn. He taught the boys all the Indian skills, not only how to trap but how to hunt the hills for meat.

"Every animal must be drawn as soon as you kill it," he would say when the boys dragged in a fawn. "And skinned while it's still warm."

He always took care to give them a reason for everything he taught them. If you're upwind of a deer he'll smell you farther

than you can shoot. Get out the guts and string it up. The wind will dry the meat, the sun will cure it, the cold will keep it.

Then came the worst winter since she had brought David to Hidden Valley. The first fine snows came in late October. By the day the Christ Child was born, the snow was too deep for David to work the trap lines as far as the lake. He had been limping worse all summer. Now he could scarcely make it to the shed to bring in enough flour for the sourdough.

The boys wanted to try the snowshoes he had helped them weave that summer. They had cut green ash saplings, stripped off the bark and heated the sticks over an open fire. Then they bent them into a loop and lashed the ends in place. She had lent a hand on weaving the rawhide, chewing the ends of the deer belly thongs, to make them limber enough to knot the lacings.

"Wait 'til the snow packs, so you won't sink in over your heads," he had warned the boys. "We'll just have to sit it out until the January thaw. Then there's enough crust on the snow to hold you up."

But her sons were not to be held in the cabin, idle. One sunshiny day they strapped on their snowshoes and set off, walking like ducks across the drifts toward the lake.

"Let them go," she had said, when David tried to get up from his willow chair by the fire to call them back. "They have to try their web feet."

They both laughed at that, and she was glad David hadn't scolded her or called the boys back. Someone had to check the trap lines as far as the lake.

When it was growing dark early in the afternoon, like her grandmother, she began to worry. After all, it may have been a mistake to let them venture across the drifts. What if they floundered, carrying the stiff bodies of the trapped foxes? And then she remembered that they knew the ways of the woods and how to survive. If they could not make it, the older boy would find shelter under a fir tree, build a lean-to of green branches. Jim knew how to strike a fire by rubbing a stick in dried moss and blowing on the smoking peat until he had a flame burning and could lay it under the stacked twigs they had gathered. In the morning they would be rested, make it back.

As it grew dark the wind blew down the chimney, sending gusts of smoke into the cabin. Giant snow flakes drifted down from the hills. And then she saw the boys coming, waddling like tired geese, back along the path their snowshoes had dug when they set out.

They were dragging something behind them, the way black ants do, as if it were too heavy to carry.

Her stomach became a ball of snow. It was a white deer, the spirit of some man who had lost his way.

"We found it by the ledge near the lake," Jim, the younger boy, said.

"Don't stand there bragging like fool white hunters," David turned from the fire and motioned toward the shed. "You know what to do with a dead animal."

"Hang it up to dry cure," the older boy said.

"You shouldn't have brought it here," White Feather drew back from the deer, clutching her throat. The spirit of the lost man inside the White Deer was coming alive, riding one wisp of smoke blown down the chimney. This lost one might have been a holy man.

"Get the carcass out of your ma's kitchen," David said. "You know how she feels about white deer, dead or alive."

"I don't believe that crazy talk," the older boy said. "A man is a man, and a deer is a deer."

"I'm scared, ma," the younger boy said, running to her and throwing his arms around her neck.

"Superstitious, that's your ma," David said, laughing. "Now get that damned deer out of here like I told you, both of you."

"Yes, sir," the older boy said. Her husband had taught the boys to add that strange word when he spoke like that, like a lumber boss. It was something out of his mysterious past. Maybe it had to do with the bits of metal inside his gut when he pressed his body against hers. Why else should he try to teach them the white man's manners? And what had he run away from, with that scared look he had shared with her that first afternoon in the inn, thirteen years ago?

"The white deer will bring a curse on us," she told him once the boys headed for the shed, dragging the carcass behind them through the snow.

"Nonsense," her husband said. "We'll have fresh deer liver for supper."

Later when the boys returned, she fried the liver for them, like a wife should. She didn't dare taste it, and its vomit smell made her feel dizzy.

All evening the wind sucked and puffed up the chimney, sending gusts of eye-watering smoke through the cabin. Her husband began to cough, and she knew the spirit of the dead deer had entered his mouth with the morsels of liver. She tried to tell him not to eat it.

But he only laughed and called her his crazy Indian squaw.

By the next morning the storm had blown itself out. The sun was a pale moon peeping up through the fir trees in the east. The boys had fried their own breakfast of sourdough, were already out in the shed. She could hear them singing as they slashed the hide off the frozen carcass with the hunting knives their father had ground for them from mill files.

Then she heard her husband coughing. It sounded more like the deep gasps for breath of a deer struck by an arrow. He was flailing with his arms as if trying to escape.

"What's wrong, husband?" But she knew he had waited too long to go to the hospital at Yellow Knife, have them take the bits of metal out of his gut. The spirit of the white deer had been frightened by feeling the deadly metal inside it. His cries of pain brought the boys running.

"What's with father?" the older boy asked. "Is he sick or something?"

"He's out of his head." But she knew it was the White Deer, thrashing around inside him. "I must get a doctor."

"We'll go," Jim said. "Tom and I on our snowshoes."

"You don't know the way to the village," she said. "I'll take the shortcut, across the lake. You stay here and keep your father in bed."

She slipped on her husband's felt boots, lashed the soles of her moccasins into the snowshoes of the older boy. Then she slipped into the padded jacket she wore to bring water from the lake.

"Your father is a very sick man," she said. "I must fetch a doctor quick. Keep him warm. I'll be back as soon as I can, with help."

She could feel their eyes following her down the path they had made the day before. Somehow they would make out until she returned with a doctor.

At first it was easy going, in the rut grooved out by the body of the frozen deer where the boys had dragged it through the snow. At the edge of the lake she stopped to search the opposite shore for the old pine. This dead tree marked the end of the lumber road where logs were dragged winter-long to be floated down the rapids to the sawmill.

The sun climbed higher in the sky. It felt warm on her back. She nosed the snowshoes into the drift and headed like a crow flies, straight for the village.

In the middle of the lake, the night wind had swept the snow into drifts. She unbuckled the snowshoes, wedged them

under her arms and broke into an Eskimo dogtrot, across the rough ice in her urgency to reach help.

At the opposite shore vast hummocks of logs were stacked on the bank, dragged there by the loggers' oxen. There she buckled on the snowshoes and headed up the old Indian trail toward the top of the ridge. The loose snow was up to her hips. Each step made it more difficult to breathe. The thin mountain air cut into her lungs like a knife, the way the metal was doing inside her crippled husband.

Halfway to the top, a giant fir had toppled across the path. She tried to crawl over it. One snowshoe slipped on the bark, and she toppled back. The other shoe caught in a branch. She heard the dull crunch of a bone. Struggling to her feet, she broke off a pine branch for a cane. She waded around the tree trunk to the trail.

All the way to the top her ankle grew weaker, and she leaned more heavily on the cane. Each step brought a stab of pain, like her leg was struck by a burning brand. At the top of the ridge the path swung around giant boulders. Far below in the broad valley lay the huts of the village, their plumes of blue smoke circling the trading post. Somehow she must reach there before dark.

Sleet had glazed the snow on that side of the mountain, far above the timber line. The snow blotted out the path worn ages before by the Indians. Guided by the direction of the distant village, she half walked, half slid down the escarpment, urged on by the thought of David thrashing about on his bed, out of his head with pain, brought on by the spirit of the White Deer.

When she came to the first stunted trees, she lost the path. Guided by her unseeing sense of direction, she plowed through the rhododendron and briars, forging downward. Her ankle was completely numb now, her leg more like a pole that dragged one snowshoe after it.

It was darker in the forest. Overhead she heard the night wind whipping the tops of the firs as if saying, wait, I'll really twist your leg before morning.

Suddenly she came out of the woods to the lumber road. It was drifted high. There was no sign that logging teams had been through since the first snow set in. It was better to wait out the storm in the woods. Even if the dry, dead branches of the pine tore at her jacket and the laurel tangled her snowshoes.

She was searching for someplace to hide, like a wild animal. Her grandmother was deathly sick and had sent White

Feather to bring the medicine man to wave his hawk feather brush over her eyes and drive out the spirit of the White Deer.

It was all so useless to try to find help. Soft blankets of snow folded over her body, to shut out the howling wind. Sleep little White Feather, safe in your cornhusk bed. Grandmother will sing you a song about the Great White Bird that soars high in the sky watching over good little girls.

She came awake, smelling smoking seal oil. The wrinkled face of an old woman who could have been her dead grandmother, was rubbing hot oil on her wrists.

"Has she come to?" a husky voice called from another room.

"I think so," the grandmother said. "Her eyes are open."

"The doctor," White Feather said. "I must get the doctor."

"I'm a doctor," a man said. He looked like a dwarf, half a man, standing there in the doorway, wearing a dumpy little hat.

"You must come with me," she said, remembering the other big-bodied man who lay tossing on the bed, across the ridge, in pain.

"Not so fast," the doctor said. "You're still beaucoup blessé, too weak to go anywhere."

She tried to get up, only to discover that her one leg was strapped to a board. One of the loggers had found her three days before, when his oxen carefully stepped over her body and stopped. Reining in, the driver had shoveled the snow from her body, brought her to the village, to the doctor's home.

"My husband will die if he doesn't get help soon," she told the doctor. But he shook his head, pointed to her ankle.

The second day, propped up in the doctor's sleigh, they set off early for Hidden Valley. Along the logging road the teams had beaten down the snow. The sleigh crunched along the glistening tracks. The last quarter mile up the ridge the mare shook her head, whinnied and tried to swing around, almost upsetting the sleigh. The sheepskin robe slipped off White Feather's knees.

"She smell something," the little French doctor said, taking out the whip and touching the sweat-whitened rump of the mare.

A twist of blue smoke drifted up from the chimney of the cabin. Everything must be all right. I am in time, Lord Jesus. Long ago the priest in the mission school at Yellow Knife had told them about the Doctor who brought the dead back to life, by rubbing spit on their closed eyes.

She pushed open the door. The boys were huddled by the fireplace, oiling traps. They looked up as if it was natural for her to be standing there, having returned from the trading post.

"You're back," the older boy said, sounding like her husband. "What kept you so long?"

The bed where she and her husband had slept for thirteen years was empty. Her sons had drawn the Hudson Bay blanket lengthwise, the way she had taught them to make up the bed.

"Where is your father?" she asked. Sudden fear set her broken ankle throbbing, and she grabbed the door to keep from toppling over.

"Asleep," the younger boy said. He dropped the trap and ran toward her, throwing his arms around her neck and sobbing.

"It was this way, Ma," the older boy rose, dusting ashes off the knees of his breeches. "After you left we had a hard time keeping him in bed. He kept calling out that the Mounties were trying to find him, take him back to the army. The third night his face turned blue and he complained about being cold."

"We kept the fire going, honest, Ma," the younger boy said, sniffling.

"I guess I fell asleep." The older boy hung the trap he was oiling on a hook on the mantel. "When I got awake that morning, the fire was out. He must have froze. We tried to get him awake, but he was stiff like a dead deer."

"Where did you put the body?" It was the little French doctor standing in the doorway. He sounded like a Mountie she had heard examining a lumberman at the trading post.

"Is it all right to show him, Ma?" asked the older boy.

She nodded. They filed out of the cabin, Indian fashion, the boys leading up the path to the shed, pulling open the door on its leather hinges. Inside, hanging from a beam, ropes under his arms, dangled the naked body of her husband.

Over his shoulder they had draped the dried hide of the white buck.

"To keep him warm, revive him," the younger boy said, answering the question in her eyes. The ropes under her husband's arms had spread them out like a bird's wings. He looked like the statue in the chapel of the mission church.

"Jesus," the little French doctor said, crossing himself. "He should be buried."

That was how she left it, when the little doctor turned the sleigh around in a circle before the cabin. He would

send back men with a sled and the priest. They would bury her husband in a coffin along the ledge in the pine woods, right and proper, par Dieu.

White Feather wedged a rail against the door of the shed so it would not blow open. Then she told the boys to get on with their trapping, taking the ones they had oiled and hung on the hook by the fireplace. She didn't want the boys around when the men came to bury their father.

Each evening the boys returned to the cabin for their supper, then tumbled into their bunks along the wall. They never mentioned their father and pretended not to see the empty chair at the table.

The first day of the next week, with the thaw, the boys left before dawn, to work the trap lines along the lake. That noon brought the heavy sled with the wooden coffin and the men who were to bury her husband. They all filed into the cabin, with Father Jacques of the village church. He had them kneel on the slab floor while he said the mass for the dead. May the Dieu, in whose likeness Jesus raised Nazareth from the dead, have compassion on the soul of the departed. Amen. Amen.

Then in a procession, the priest leading and chanting, they moved out to the shed. White Feather pulled off the bar and opened the door. She looked up expecting to see the body of her husband hanging from the beam.

Instead, the white buck hide lay crumpled on the floor. The ropes that the boys had slung under his arms to hoist him to the beam had been neatly coiled and laid on a bench.

"There is no body here," said the priest as if he were saying a litany. Then looking at her, he repeated, "There is no body here."

The men stared at White Feather, asking by their eyes, what have you done with your husband?

"Bringing us out here on some fool's errand," said one of the lumbermen, "to lose a day's pay in the woods."

"It's plain her man ran off," said the thin-faced undertaker.

"Probably got fed up to here living with a squaw and her brats," the foreman said. "Let's get the hell out of here."

They left mumbling. Even the priest said nothing, crawled back on the front seat of the sled, without blessing her.

When the boys came back, she told them what had happened. They both rushed out to the shed, hurried back with the ropes.

"He got away, Ma," said the older boy.

Somehow they didn't seem

surprised that the men hadn't found their father hanging from the beam.

That summer she caught her first sight of the white buck. It was standing on the ledge, watching the cottage. The boys saw it later that week when it followed them to the lake. It seemed unafraid when they called to it and did not bound away into the woods. Soon it would come to the cabin door, paw at the sill.

They took to feeding it lettuce from the wattle-fenced garden. It would reach out its muzzle. But if either of the boys tried to stroke its neck, the white deer would snort and run back into the brush. As if it couldn't stand a human hand touching its white coat.

"It's the spirit of your father, come back to see how we are getting along," she told them one evening at supper.

"That's nonsense, Ma," the older boy said. "It's just another white deer."

"Deer liver is good," the younger boy said. "I'm getting sick of jerked deer."

She leaned across the table and slapped her son on the mouth.

"What did you hit him for, Ma?" the older boy asked.

"He's got to learn never to shoot a white deer," she said, beginning to cry.

The White Deer never came back after that. Later that fall, the boys found it, a hunter's arrow through its heart, sprawled out by the ledge where they has found the other white deer. They buried it under the leaves by the ledge, then piled stones over the body to keep off the foxes.

Somehow, when they told her that evening what they had done, White Feather knew that her husband too was dead and decently buried. But somewhere in the woods he would still be moving about, with his long legs, waiting for her to join him.

That would be after the boys had grown up and married and she would be alone in the cabin where her grandmother had first told her the story of the White Deer and how it carries about with it the spirit of some lost man.

John Sladek's parodies have heretofore concerned themselves with such household names as *s**c *s*m*v and R*y Br*db*ry. However, most of our readers will be familiar with the work of Ph*l*p K. D*ck, whose complex novels often deal with the eleventh century Chinese game of prophecy, *Mah-Jongg.*

Solar Shoe-Salesman

by PH*L*P K. D*CK

I

Stan Houseman, shoe-salesman, punched a cupee of Kaff from the kitchen and scanned the footlines of his morning newspaper:

OLYMPIC FINALS AT CARMODY STADIUM

POLICE BREAK UP HATTONITE RIOT

The stock market report listed only two corporations—the two which had between them divided the world—North American Boot & Shoe (NABS) and Eurasian Footwear (Eurafoot). NABS was up two points, Eurafoot down the same, inevitably. In this two-person, zero-sum game, one side could only profit at the expense of the other. *Like Karen and me,* he thought grimly.

The corner of his eye caught movement—the racing figure of an autistic child. When he looked right at it, it was gone.

Karen came into the kitchen.

"Let's not start anything, for God's sake," he said.

"I'm getting a divorce, Stan. I'm seeing the lawster this afternoon."

Suddenly the coffee-substitute tasted very bitter.

II

Ed Pagon gazed into the camera face of "Mel," the robot interviewer for KHBT-TV. "Somehow I feel this is more than just a game I'm playing here today," he said. "I think a lot more is at stake here today than the Olympic jacks championship."

"Tell me, Ed," said the robot, "how does it feel, being the only male contestant in this jacks tournament?"

How do you think it feels? Like being castrated, he thought. Forcing a smile, he replied, "Frankly, I've always thought of jacks as a man's game, Mel. It's an art as well as a sport, and men traditionally excel in all the arts. . ."

When the interview was over, Ed went into his dressing room

and warmed up. He seated himself on the floor with the regulation red rubber ball and steel jacks and tried to empty his mind for Zen exercises. The idea was to pick up jacks without picking them up mentally.

Onesies without thinking about it. Twosies without thinking about it. Threesies. . .

Ed felt pain, a band of it, squeezing his guts. Pain blurred his vision as he looked down at the jack on the floor. This was no jack.

It was a tiny metal man with his arms outstretched, fastened by magnets to a steel cross.

III

Joe Feegle stopped Stan Houseman outside the sales cubicle. "The word is, we're on the brink of war, Stan. The two company presidents are having a summit meeting this afternoon—they'll be playing one round of The Game—and if they tie, we'll have war."

"But they always tie."

"Right. Hey, look!"

Both men turned to stare at a figure at the other end of the corridor, a figure in the official gold-and-black uniform of an Armorer. President Moniter was calling in an Armorer to design new weapons for the company —a bad omen.

Another was the unrest caused, or exploited by the barefoot fanatic sect who called themselves the Hattonites. As Stan unlocked his cubicle and prepared for work, he thought of Herkimer Hatton's strange and fascinating cult.

Little was known of the late Herkimer Hatton himself, except that he'd lived twenty years before, had been accident-prone in the extreme. In a series of over a thousand small accidents, Hatton had lost limbs and other chunks of his body and replaced them with synthetics. Finally he was entirely an android, except to his followers. Legend had it that he'd finished up on an iron cross, but that he would return when the world needed him.

And now the world needed something, fast. Stan cleared his mind of Hatton and all other worries and turned the energy of his psychic influence upon a million potential customers. His influence spread over the city, giving a million men and women some imperceptible nudge. For some it might come as a moment of reflection: *I do need new shoes.* . . . For others it might be a slight hesitation as they passed a NABS window display. Still others would be in the stores, trying shoes on, when suddenly they'd find just the thing. . . .

IV

Ferris Moniter, president of

NABS, glimpsed what looked like an autistic child out of the corner of his eye. He bumped his head as he stepped into his private autogyro.

"Ow. Second time I've bumped my head on that doorframe."

His bodyguard, Truit, stiffened. "Yes? Don't close that door just yet, sir. I want a look at that frame." His expert fingers sought and found a tiny hairlike wire. "Just as I thought, Mr. Moniter. An animal magnet, set there to attract your head. Looks like the work of Nexus Brill."

"Eurafoot's Armorer? But assassination's against the rules!"

The bodyguard laughed. "Armorer's have no rules, sir. My guess is, he meant to stun you, just before the Game. Probably had a side bet on it. They say Brill is getting rich from betting on the Game. Owns Paris, Rome, Antwerp, a dozen such cities. They say he's had some of them miniaturized and made into charms for his wife's charm bracelet. By the way, it might interest you to know that our own Armorer, Amos Honks, visited the office this morning, while you were out. He may have had access to the autogyro. . ."

Ferris Monitor blinked. "You can't mean that, Truit! Why, Amos Honks is our only hope. Think of all the weaponry he's designed for us! How can you suspect him?"

Truit thought of the aerial battleship, filled with hydrogen and surrounded with heavy armor. "I know, sir—but I can't help feeling that the two Armorer's are in cahoots."

Monitor sighed. "Anyway, are there any more assassination attempts in the cards today?"

"Not *cards*, sir." Truit sounded pained. "*Tiles.* Let's have a look." He laid out the traditional tiles of the eleventh-century Chinese game of prophecy, *Mah-Jongg.* "I'm afraid it's the East Wind, sir. And the Four of Bamboos."

"Oh? Is that bad? What's the reading?"

Truit opened the book and read:

"*Many small greatnesses deny.*

No same.

It does not further to discover several gifts only.

The wise king avoids fried foods."

He closed the book. "Sir, I think it's dangerous to continue this trip to Chicago."

"Nonsense, Truit. I must go on. I must play and win. To give up now would mean economic collapse, and resurgence of the old, corrupt U.N., and slavery for most of the human race. The tiles must be wrong for once."

But he knew the tiles were never wrong.

V

At Carmody Stadium, the robot doctorator was examining Ed Pagon after his collapse. He lay on the dressing room floor, doubled up with pain. The robot's probes moved to check his respiration, pulse, heart. . .

"What is it, doc?" asked an official. "Appendicitis?"

The doctorator peered at him over its symbolic square-rimmed glasses. "Don't quote me on this boys," it said, rubbing its iron chin. "But it 'pears as if this here fella is fixing to have a baby!"

VI

Amos Honks, Armorer, awoke to a sense of danger. Karen Houseman was still asleep beside him.

He remembered the whole nightmarish episode at NABS: Ferris Moniter telling him to arm the corporation for A.O.W.—all-out war. Telling him he'd have to do better than hay-fever bombs, better even than dropping *Herpes simplex*, the cold-sore virus, into drinking water supplies.

"You'll have to do a lot better," Moniter had said. "Don't forget, you're up against Nexus Brill. . .by the way, did you know you're wife's been seen with Brill?"

And later, she couldn't deny it. The world had come to a sickening halt then, this afternoon at the lawster's office, when they had obtained their punched-card decree nisi. There he'd met Karen Houseman, and the two newly divorced people had just naturally clung together. . .so here he was, still sensing danger like a smell of fear.

Outside he could hear the sound of muffled rotors—a police 'gyro trying to land quietly in the yard. He sensed, rather than heard, the faceless lawman creeping towards the house, the sound of a weapon being eased from its plastic holster and aimed through the wall at his brain waves. . .the trigger being squeezed. . .

Amos rolled across the bed and hit the floor just as the humming green beam of a stupidifier flicked through the wall. It caught Karen and she slumped sideways, babbling and drooling.

Before the cop could fire again, Amos snatched a charm off his ex-wife's charm bracelet, flung open the door and pitched it into the yard. It was a miniaturized city. He counted to ten and breathed, "Good-by, Paris."

With a thunder of cobblestones, the mini-city sprang to full size in the yard. He heard the cop's scream, cut off by the

shriek of tires and the blare of a taxi horn.

Amos smashed a window, gashing his arm, and raced across the Place de la Bastille to the empty police autogyro. He climbed in and took off, heading for Chicago. There had to be some way to stop the Game—before the Game stopped everything else.

If only he could design some weapon Nexus Brill could not counter. He played the stream of ideas across his mind:

How about mad dogs? A nullitron beam? Unconscious mines? Fire-cabbages. . .even an Earth-mover, which could shift the entire planet during an aerial battle, thus leaving enemy aircraft stranded in outer space.

Why was it Nexus Brill always had his ideas first? As he wondered, the aura began. The perimeter of his vision was filled with autistic kids; his ears jangled with flashing lightmares, and he felt the deep molecular and genetic shift begin:

He was, as usual, turning into Nexus Brill.

VII

The autistic child pointed to a picture of Stan Houseman and said, "Nice mans."

The Hattonite elders looked at one another. Why "mans"? Could Houseman be, after all, the discalced prophet promised by Herkimer Hatton?

VIII

The data-scan footline flickered upon the instrument panel of the autogyro:

LABORS OF HERCULES?

Athlete to give birth!

"I don't understand that," said Ferris Moniter, looking away to the still blue waters of the Americ Ocean. An hour remained before they reached the finger-shaped Isle of Michigan, with Chicago glittering at its tip like a bright hangnail. Far to the east lay the dark continent of Atlantica, broken only by the British Lakes; beyond that, the Europic Sea.

"In this novel I'm reading," he said, taking the foilback from his pockette, "the author pretends that Lucifer *lost* his war against Heaven, so that all the world is reversed, see?"

Truit, his bodyguard, laughed. "Science fiction, eh? Don't believe everything you see in white on black. What's the name of this book?"

"Autogyro Ace," said the president. "An Autogyro Novel, by Chipdip K. Kill."

At that moment a dot appeared above the horizon, far behind them. It grew rapidly into another autogyro.

"Who is it, Truit?"

"Too far to see, sir. Might be friendly. . ." The bodyguard trained his electric binoculars on the strange craft, then gasped. "No! It can't be!"

In a moment the stranger was close enough for Moniter to see, too. The other autogyro contained another Ferris Moniter and another Truit. As he watched, it came closer, passed through his own craft, and sped on towards Chicago. They could clearly hear the other Truit saying, "Chipdip K. Kill, my foot!"

IX

The president of Eurafoot sat in shadow, behind the Game table, a masked entity without a name.

"Sit you down, Mr. Moniter," said a disembodied voice. "You know the rules of the Game." When Truit had checked his seat for bombs and virus, Moniter took his place. An aide brought in a pad of paper and ruled the traditional four lines on its top sheet: two vertical, two horizontal.

"You may go first, Mr. Moniter. You have the X's, and the advantage—for the moment."

From the next room came gunshots and electric fizzling, as Eurafoot's androids joined with NABS' cyborgs to fight off Hattonite assassins.

As Moniter started to make his move, his opponent leaned forward, bringing his face suddenly into the light.

"You!"

X

Joe Feegle wrote, "It was a two-person, zero-sum game. Stan Houseman had established that general strict determinateness held in all cases of special strict determinateness, and in other cases as well, but he had not excluded the possibility that the advance from special to general determinateness was no advance at all! Then he himself was an android, too!"

Joe was working on his novel, ANDROGYNOID,

written under his pseudonym "H.K.(Kid) Cliplip." Joe suffered from the delusion that he himself was written, under a pseudonym.

XI

"You see," said the president of Eurafoot, "when Nexus Brill broke that window, he cut himself. He is now infected with a virus that will scourge our planet. It causes the feet to rot off, heh heh."

"I think Amos Honks will have something to say about that," said a voice from the dark doorway.

"The autistic child!"

"Wrong," said Stan Houseman. He fired the demoralizer beam once, and the odd president flopped to the floor, spineless. It was the end of the universe, all agreed.

XII

Nexus Brill saw the great ruled line coming across the sky. He speeded up the autogyro and tried to take evasive action, but it was no use. The ruled line reached him and cut him, along with the earth and sky, clean in two.

XIII

"So it was Ed Pagon who gave birth to the new universe, eh?"

"That's right. There weren't any sides, really, since each company owned all the stock of the other anyway. And since both were really owned by the Hattonites. . ."

"Then everyone was an android, really."

"Brill must have suspected as much. When he cut himself on that window, he failed to bleed."

He shook his head. "Brill *was* human, though bloodless."

"Oddly enough." She smiled. "Then. . .it's all over?"

"In a sense."

So saying, Stan and Karen Houseman walked barefoot with the other pilgrims, into the former shoestore.

—JOHN SLADEK

Andrew Offutt has appeared in *Galaxy, If* and ORBIT and has had several novels published. This story, he says, grew from an accident to his wife that caused him to do some thinking about the selfishness of love. "What would a man do, were he as crazy about his wife as I am, if he learned she was a witch?"

Sareva: In Memoriam

by andrew j offutt

THE SKY WAS BLACK AND angry and full of pregnant rain clouds and rumbling thunder like a hungry belly the day of our marriage, and my beautiful bride said, "Rain, rain go away, come again another day," and when she came smiling up the aisle to where I waited, the bright sun was sending vari-colored fingers of light through the church windows.

Six months later, when we had planned the picnic for two weeks, the radio and papers and pre-late-show weather pro-claimed a ninety-five percent probability of rain, and rain it did, seemingly everywhere around us while my beautiful bride and I picnicked, as though we were in a shimmering cage of falling water. But above our dry heads the sun smiled.

Once I'd seen her I knew there could be no other, and that was strange, that I should have loved, seemingly instantly, a willowy girl with a face slightly too long and a bosom lacking the thrusting perfection of my dreams. Her skin was pale and she did not tan easily, so that she must always be very careful about sunburn. She was covered with freckles two days into summer, close-set spatters of copper by firelight, just the color of her hair. It was her eyes that caught yours, and held them. They were a clear, liquid, surely impossible green, and I remember that the first time I saw her I was sure she wore tinted contact lenses. She did not. Her vision was perfect.

She was Sareva, and laid claim to Irish ancestry and orphaned upbringing, and she was my wife, and in loving her I had some understanding of those dead poets who swore so loudly to have loved so deeply.

Sareva did not walk in beauty like the night; her color was day.

She was passionate, wildly so, and I was quite able to cope. Our honeymoon was still not over when we were into the third year of our marriage, and I was silent and sorrowful and self-conscious and full of contempt when other men said the things they say about their wives; the Little Woman, the Better Half, the Boss, the Ball-and-Chain, and I thought that the actress Welch was a stupid silly creature who wore her blouse the same way she wore her mouth: hanging open. I never saw her sexuality, for I possessed and was possessed by Sareva.

She even brought me fortune. I had never been either stupid or lazy, but some things take time, and I was a copywriter when we were married, a copywriter with prospects. She was uninterested in my work, interested only in me, and talked only briefly with my associates and the several client representatives at the flamboyant office Christmas party eight months after our marriage. Nor was I aware of having made such an impression on Anderson of Redleaf, but when they brought out their new cigarette at the beginning of the year, Anderson asked for me. Clinton, the Redleaf account exec, acted strange after that. I tried to avoid him without seeming to.

The taxi he rode to work each day was broadsided by a tractor-trailer full of peanut butter on the third of March, and on the tenth I was the new account executive for Redleaf. It was either that, Mr. Dalby of Dalby, Lockwood, Marschak said, or lose the account; he'd got that from both Anderson and Redleaf's president, and he wondered what in the blue blazing hell I had done so to win their confidence and militant support. I could not tell him.

Dittmar became ill only a few days after the party to celebrate my bringing the Lady's Maid account into the agency, in June, and is still a helpless vegetable who wets his bed and complains of spiders on his face, night and day. Dittmar had three major accounts, and there was a terrible flap, and then a meeting. Dalby, Lockwood, Marschak could not afford to lose any of those three acounts. We were all asked to present a plan of action, soonest, which meant the following day.

"What'd you do to poor old Dittmar, Byron?" Ted Lorenz asked me as we left the meeting.

"Hm? What?"

He chuckled, squeezing my shoulder. I had always hated the way Lorenz squeezed shoulders. "It was Ditty vomit-

ed all over your wife's dress at the party, wasn't it? Green faille as I remember—or so Anne told me on the way home. What'd you do to poor old Dittmar, Byron?"

I said nothing. I thought it entirely too soon for us to make any sort of jokes at all about poor Dittmar.

It was a bad sort of night. Oh, I don't mean that Sareva and I had trouble; we never did. But I was nervous, uptight of course, and while I wanted very much to drink too much, I knew I didn't dare. I knew I had to come up with something brilliant.

"But do you care, darling? Do you want any of those accounts?"

I smiled. "I had an idea for Pixieware two months ago," I told my Sareva, "that was so brilliant I couldn't do anything else all day."

"And did you tell Dittmar?" She stroked my thigh, her bright green eyes on my face.

"No," I said, and I sighed. "I wish I had, poor bastard. But—you know. He'd just have sloughed it off, or botched it."

"Well then, why don't you just concentrate on that one and forget the other two, darling."

"Baby, if anyone comes up with an idea for keeping all three of those damned accounts with us, he'd have to insult ugly Marschak's ugly wife to avoid getting a vice-presidency."

She laughed, rising with a supple grace as unbelievable as the brilliance of her eyes. "Well, then, I'd best get out of your way. I'll just go up and read tonight. Get you anything?"

I patted her tight little rump. "Not a thing sweetheart, and thanks. I'm sorry."

She laughed, turning on her way out of the room to look back at me. "I've been married to a brilliant lover for three years," she said. "I think I can stand being married to a hard-pressed account exec-on-his-way-to-a-vice-presidency one night in my life. I really should read that silly book, anyhow. After all, twenty-two weeks on the *Times* best seller list."

"I'm crazy about you," I told my Sareva, and of course she came back to kiss me again, and then she went out and brought me a pint of beer because beer has never seemed to interfere with my mind work. She went upstairs then, and I pondered and scribbled and dreamed and sketched and woke up in that stupid living room chair the next morning. It was something I had never done before. I was embarrassed, contrite, and stiff.

Sareva laughed. The price to me of being a genius, she said, and to her of being married to one.

I told her I'd be home early.

I wasn't, as it turned out. I entered the meeting with a full briefcase of drawings, ad plans, and even sketches, something I do very poorly. But I displayed less than half of them. I sat there hardly hearing the others, feeling inspired and so full of thoughts and ideas that I was about to explode. I think I must have looked uninterested, and there was an unpleasant quality in Dalby's voice when he called on me, last.

I had a terrible headache after that meeting. I had stood and made a brief speech which I did not remember later, and outlined a general plan and then three individual ones that I remembered, later, only partially.

Dalby took me with him to the cool reception at Pixieware, and when we left they were not only warm but had increased their billing by three full pages in *Life*. Nor were they happy to have me leave just then, but I had to hurry to accompany Marschak to the second Dittmar account, which we saved and which Marschak promised them would be under my personal supervision.

Next day Marschak took me to the third Dittmar account. We met an unpleasant surprise; BBD&O had two men in the office. They wound up being embarrassed and dismissed, and all three Dittmar accounts were saved. The only problem was that all three of them insisted that I supervise their campaigns, personally. After all, they had been my concepts.

The upshot, naturally enough, was that Dalby, Lockwood, Marschak had three accounts with better relations and higher billings than before, as well as a new vice-president. I was supervising too many accounts not to be elevated; I'd have been out-earning them all, and that just won't do.

Three months later Marschak died, heart attack at age 43, and Dalby asked me if that scared me so badly that I would object to my name's being added to the firm's. I assured him that I would not.

I had paid little attention to Sareva's once-a-month club, but it went down badly that night when I found our overpriced new apartment empty. I remembered that this was her bridge night. And I was bubbling over with the news: I was to be a partner!

Breaking a personal rule, I celebrated a bit too much, alone, with a bottle of twelve-year-old brandy. I also smoked too much, and when I saw the pile of butts and ash, I remembered how hard Sareva had been trying to get me to cut down. I was still feeling sorry for myself, not having my

wife at home when I returned with the golden fleece, but now I felt a bit guilty too.

Thus I did something unusual: knowing I was a sneak and a cheat, I took the two ashtrays to the kitchen and set them on the floor beside the step-on garbage can. I found another of the brown paper bags Sareva lined it with. Then, grunting as I squatted, I began the rather unpleasant process of transferring the contents of the garbage into the new sack. My purpose, of course, was to empty the can halfway down, pour in most of the butts and ash, and replace the garbage on top.

How childish all of us are sometimes, in pretending to be deceiving someone else while working so hard at deceiving ourselves!

The #2 cling peaches can rattled. I frowned at it, noting that the top, serrated into a nasty saw-toothed disk by the opener, had not only not been totally severed, but had been folded back into place. There was no reason to pry that lid up, nicking my finger in the process. Pure curiosity.

Inside was a little clay figurine, a strange little fellow with a pot belly and carefully etched spectacles and out-of-fashion bow tie. Across its chest had been lettered the words, in tiny pin scratches, "F. Edwin Marschak." On the left side of the chest had been drawn a Valentine heart, again by the scratch of something like a pin.

Perhaps it had been the same pin that was now thrust directly through the center of the figurine's heart.

I won't say that I thought nothing of it, or even a little. Nor will I say that I leaped to any conclusions about the manner of Marschak's death and matters such as witchcraft and voodoo. After all!

I did remain there squatting, examining the little clay doll, or rather staring at it and thinking while hardly seeing it, for a long while. At last I remembered where I was and what I was about. I emptied one of the ashtrays into the garbage, replaced what I had taken out, and wadded up the extra sack. Pushing that down into the side of the sack in the can, I wondered why I hadn't done that with the ashes and butts in the first place.

I rose with a grunt, stiff-legged and feeling the circulation rush fierily back into my calves. The peach can I left on top of the trash, pushing it down with a foot and dropping the lid. Then I transferred part of the butts from one ashtray into the other and replaced them both. The Marschak doll I set on the purely decorative mantelpiece

above the genuine stone but purely decorative fireplace.

Then of course I sat down and defeated my entire purpose by smoking one cigarette after another until, at something after one-thirty, Sareva came in.

"Well, look who's up! Oh, darling, you haven't even changed *clothes!*" She strode to me, for she never walked, my long-legged, red-haired, green-eyed wife; she strode. "Heyyy," she smiled. "That bottle was full last time I saw it. And—oh, Byron! All these cigarettes!"

She wasn't talking about cigarettes, of course, she was talking about their twisted corpses, now stacked like dead slugs in the big ashtray on the fruitwood table beside my chair.

"How'd the coven meeting go?" I asked, smiling pleasantly.

All my life I will wish that I had not asked. I did not really believe it. Not really. It is possible to *sort-of* believe things, to entertain notions, even to extrapolate from them and phantasize. But still, back in there within the final judgment chamber of the mind, we don't really, *really* believe.

But she gasped, and the freckles were suddenly brighter, flaming like measles against her suddenly pallid face, and her dress went tight over her breasts. And her green eyes became huge.

We stared at each other, I in the big chair we had picked out together to rule this new apartment, the Account Exec apartment, and she standing over me, bent just a little from the waist with one slim-fingered white hand on the ashtray.

"And how did you KNOW?" the villainous villain demands, and the clever detective smiles that little smile and says, "Ah, but I didn't, you just told me!" And then comes the big chase or slug-out scene.

At that moment I believed. I knew that my Sareva was a witch.

She straightened, sighing. "It's too late to try to pretend now, isn't it? I didn't recover fast enough."

"That's right. You didn't recover fast enough."

"Yes. I'm a witch."

"I don't believe it."

Once when I was a child I had brought up the inevitable subject to my father. Santa Claus. So-and-so and so-and-so said there wasn't any.

"And what do you think, son?" he asked, looking seriously at me and letting the paper go down a little, lowering the barrier between adult and child.

"I think there *is*," I said, which was mostly hope, and then he told me that there wasn't, and I said in a tiny voice, "I didn't think there was."

Now I knew that Sareva was a witch, but when she said it, in just those three words, an utterly flat and unadorned declarative, I went the other way. A witch isn't something that someone *is.* You might suspect or believe that someone *might* be. But not if that someone says so, because it just isn't the sort of thing anyone admits, and so I said, "I don't believe it." But I did, and both of us knew that.

She smiled. "How did you find out?"

I gestured. She turned to look at poor old Marschak, over there on the mantel with a pin through his heart. I watched her, not Marschak. She sighed. Her shoulders sagged a little. She didn't act shocked, or even angry; just resigned, devitalized, sort of, and maybe defeated. My discovery of her, of course, was defeat.

"How—how long, Sareva?"

I never called her Sareva, or hardly ever, and she seldom called me Byron. We had begun with the endearing terms, and we had retained them both because of habit and because we were still lovers, not just husband and wife.

She said without turning, "All my life. Or nearly. You might as well say all my life."

"Dittmar?"

"Yes."

"Oh, my god." I hadn't wanted her to say yes. Not Dittmar, too. But I had to keep on going. "And—"

"Yes. Clinton, too." She still hadn't turned.

"Oh, my god. Then. . . I've done nothing," my ego said, going into mourning for itself. "And other things too. The three Dittmar accounts—"

"I worked so hard for that," she said quietly, with her shoulders still sagging. "I was exhausted for days. You were so high with it you hardly noticed. And I was so happy." She turned to face me. "I was so happy, darling! If you wanted to be *president*—"

"Of the company," I asked, putting my head a little on one side, "or the country?"

"Which?" she asked, smiling delightedly, my fairy godmother. Ready to begin whatever it was she had to do. Her spells or whatever.

"Sareva?"

I watched that hurt her, my calling her by her name rather than "darling" or "sweetheart" or "lovequeen" or even the ubiquitous and nigh-meaningless "honey" or "dear."

She asked "what?" without opening her mouth.

"Is— is there a Byron doll?"

"Oh, my darling, no, no, NO!" She hurled herself at me, and I held her, afraid of her and loving her, repelled by her and crazy in love with her, hating

her because she had robbed me of my ego and loving her precisely as much as yesterday because she was Sareva. And she didn't even have to say it. She had done it all for me.

But not Dittmar. Dittmar had vomited on her green faille dress. The rest had been good fortune out of bad. She had seen a way to make me prosper once more, out of her vengeance on a man who had vomited his supper and his wine and several bourbons-and-water over her dress. She had smashed him down, turned him into a human vegetable who wet the bed and complained of invisible spiders on his face.

Yes. I was afraid of her.

And I still loved her. Stupid, to say "still." *I loved her.* That was a state of being. I was incapable of not loving her.

"Promise me you won't ever, ever do it again," I murmured, fully thirty minutes later. We were still there, with me bending forward in the chair and her half on me, half on the floor. Clutching at each other. "Let me hold the reins of my life, Sareva."

"Oh, yes, Byron, Byron, darling, darling, if that's what you want! Whatever you want, darling, darling."

And we went to bed.

But I was afraid of her. I wondered what if I vomited on her. Or, no, something worse than that, surely. Surely it would take more than that from *me.* But I couldn't help thinking about it. What if I angered her, really angered her?

I touched none of the available secretaries or client representatives or the girl in the art department with the fantastic chest who was obviously ready to flop on my rug or my desk or wherever I happened to direct, with her legs apart. I didn't *need* sex, there was plenty and more than plenty at home. But—I was a man, and so I had certain straying *wants,* wants that could so obviously be attended to for a man who is vice-president at age twenty-nine.

But I was afraid.

And too, there was something else. There was no way I could ask Sareva if each new success or triumph, however minor or large, was my doing or if she had been responsible. Perhaps she hadn't promised at all. Perhaps she had performed the witch's equivalent to crossing her fingers. Perhaps she couldn't help herself, or couldn't bear to allow me to stand alone. Perhaps I'd have fallen flat, lost the accounts and the power and the respect and the income, perhaps the position and even the job; I couldn't know. I couldn't be sure, and I couldn't ask her. Nor, I found quickly, could I

come home playing the normal (or even genius) jubilant husband, to tell my wife what I had done *that* day.

She loved me, and she could not have tormented me more if she had hated me. At times I envied Dittmar. But I never mentioned him to her. I was afraid to. I wanted to suggest that she let him die. Or kill him. But I had never succeeded in working out, in my own small middle-class mind, what was proper in such matters. When was death preferable to life?

The baby was born nine months and three days after the night I found the Marschak doll.

It was a very difficult pregnancy. My wife, whom I loved, was extremely, ridiculously brave and strong, but she suffered and I knew that she suffered. The baby would have to be gone after, the obstetrician said, and she positively refused.

"I can't," she told me, after he had called and demanded that I either talk some sense into her or, like a medieval manor lord, *order* her to allow him to do what was totally necessary for hers and the baby's safety. "I can't, darling. I— I—" She bit her lip and looked away, not before I'd seen the liquid glisten in her eyes. "It's a part of my. . .my bargain. I cannot."

"Your BARGAIN!" We had never discussed it. We had, in point of fact, discussed increasingly less since the night I found—accept the melodramatic in the interests of brevity: the Night. "Darling you mean—you haven't. . .good god, is there a bargain with the DEVIL?"

She turned to look at me, rather sadly, for she was always rather sad when I showed ignorance on a point, or less knowledge than she possessed in some area. "No, no, there is no devil, no evil creature of Persian dualism. There are only elemental powers, neither good nor evil. Except. . .well, you've seen. It is so. . .difficult to obtain the good without having to go through the bad. It's—it's like freedom, that old thing about one man's freedom ending where another man's nose begins. Well, good for one often. . .too often. . .comes from—someone else's, uh, misfortune."

She hadn't meant to murder those men, in other words. Just to help me. I wondered what had happened to the rainstorm that was supposed to have fallen the day we were married. A waterspout at sea perhaps? A ruined outing for some family or group? A soggy end for a lovers' grassy afternoon, someplace where it was not supposed to rain that day?

She could not explain, or would not explain, but she could not and would not submit to Caesarean section. She was quite certain that she would die if she did, and so I told the obstetrician.

"She damned well may die anyhow. Chances are ninety-nine to one she's got a breech, and I wouldn't make any bets whatever on her ability to survive. She's too tiny there."

"She will survive," I said, thinking of my wife's powers. "But she is absolutely convinced that a Caesarean will kill her, doctor, and you know as well as I how dangerous that sort of belief is."

"Get another doctor," he said, and so we got another doctor. One thing about that man; he really believed. And surely the attempted robbery of his office by an addict who broke in when the doctor happened to be working late, who stabbed him thirteen times with a knife and left him in an enormous lakelet of blood—surely that was happenstance.

One night when the baby was a week away, Sareva said something terribly, uncharacteristically wifely.

"Darling? You never tell me about the office any more. I mean—you don't come home bragging that you did this or that, winner of bread. That's a normal thing to do, isn't it?"

I raised my eyes to her in anguish. *Normal?* my eyes screamed. *How can we ever be normal?*

She must have seen it all. She came to me in a rush, as she had that Night, except that now she was so unwieldy with our child, who was truly a child of love. "Oh, darling, I'm NOT! I HAVEN'T! I SWEAR!"

I suppose my eyes answered that, too. What could she swear by? And how could I be sure?

Unwieldy or not, our love-making was violent that night.

The next morning she said, "You can't be sure, can you? That's it, isn't it? I'm. . .I'm torturing you!"

I couldn't answer her. She was weeping when I left for the office.

My wife, I thought, looking about at others on the streets and wondering what their reaction would be if I told them. My wife is a witch, you see, but she's sworn off. She's joined Witches Anonymous and she doesn't make me be successful any more. Because she loves me, you see, and I love her too, like Browning and Barrett, like Pyramus and Thisbe, like Abelard and Heloise, like the silliest cornball lovers in the silliest cornball movies you ever saw. But, she tortures me. Because, you see, I can't be *sure* she's taken the cure. She loves me and *wishes*

me success; how can I be certain what powers she possesses? How can I be sure her wishing me success isn't enough?

Haw, some ass might well say, *I wish* my *old lady was a witch! I could* use *a little help, and I wouldn't be stupid like you, jack! It's every man for himself in this dog-eat-dog world, and who gives a damn how you Make It?*

"One thing you've got to believe, whether you can believe anything else or not," she told me that night with her eyes full and leaking tears in shining paths down her cheeks. "Oh, darling, darling, I could never hurt you. I don't want to torture you as I must be. But I don't know how NOT to! I could never, never hurt you, darling. I love you, I love you, love you—"

And she must have seen it in my eyes, a bright yellow fleck of fear perhaps, because she broke off and wept as she never had before. And I was silent, powerless.

Now, you see, we had come upon a new thing. Now, loving each other, incapable of hurting each other, we were torturing each other.

There's no way even to be sure about her death. Perhaps the Caesarean would have killed her as she believed. Perhaps she'd have died as she did, during the breech, witch or not. Except that I had a clue. The last thing she said when they wheeled her in on the rolling table, with her all sort of limp and rather drunk on the tranquilizer they give to prepare for the anesthetic inside, was this:

"I'll never torture you again, darling. I love you."

And they wheeled her in, and when they wheeled her out, the sheet was over her head. She had died, they said, before the baby took its first breath. But it had, and I was fortunate to be the proud father of a fine, perfectly normal baby girl.

Accept it? Accept Sareva's death? Impossible. Not with the kind of love we had. Have. I could not, did not, do not accept it. It is unacceptable. I had rather killed her myself. An instant after her orgasm, so that I'd have known she died ecstatically happy, and so that I would have *known she died.*

I could not name the baby Sareva. I had to. I could not. I had to.

I named her Sarah Evelyn.

One night when she was seven months old, on Mrs. Goodall's night off—I had to get someone, of course—I slipped into Sarah Evelyn's room to look at her a moment before I drank myself into some capability of sleep.

She lay in her crib, on her

back, with the silly little brightly-colored Walt-Disney-characters mobile twisting and dipping above her head. I started to leave, then paused. Something was not right.

Why was that mobile spinning?

It was that, a mobile, a child's gaudy eye-attracter and visual pacifier, not a perpetual motion machine. I stepped closer.

It was turning because a spider had attached a filament of its web stuff to one bright little appendage, a yellow Pluto-the-Pup, and was at the other end, assiduously at work. Sawing, sawing. . .as though deliberately off-balancing that mobile, agitating that mobile, making it. . .mobile.

I snapped the filament, shining in the moonlight, and stalked and heroically slew the small brownish spider. On the way out of the room I looked into the crib at the bright green eyes that gazed back at me.

I touched her fat cheek with one finger. "Good night sweetheart," I said. "Daddy's not going to let any old spider hurt his baby."

And I went out, thinking of what Sareva had said. Her last words to me, as they wheeled her into the delivery room in which she had—had she?—tried to deliver me from evil. From torture.

I'll never torture you again, darling. I love you.

I thought about those words again a few minutes ago, when the baby said her first words. I am sorry now that I named her Sarah Evelyn. I have wanted so desperately to call her Sareva, and more than once I have, accidentally. But now I wish I had named her something idiotic such as Endora or Samantha. She is a year old, and a few minutes ago she said her first words. Very coherently, and with exactly the emphasis I indicate here, while staring at me with bright green eyes from beneath her orangy-red curls.

"*I*," she said, "*don't* love you."

I know what she has told me. I understand. And I must accept it, submit to it, whatever it is. God, I can't kill Sareva's child—I can't cause Sareva's death again!

DOWN FROM THE AMOEBA

I WAS AT A PARTY LAST week. Most of us, including myself, were in the basement with the drinks and (in my case) the hors d'oeuvres. Upstairs, virtually alone, was the young lady who had been kind enough to accompany me. A quiet, sensitive creature, she had to withdraw every once in a while.

Later, she said to me, "I was half asleep, when suddenly I became aware of the rapid, quavering, cracked voice of an old, old man downstairs. That shocked me awake, because I knew there was no old man at the party. I listened, but I couldn't make out the words. Then the voice stopped and there was a roar of laughter. I relaxed, because I knew it was you telling the joke about the 88-year-old rabbi."*

That tells you two things about me. First, it shows I'm a darned good story-teller. Modesty forbids me to say this, but I never listen to modesty.

The second thing is that I tend to repeat myself. If I hear a joke I like, I spend at least a month telling it to every one I meet, which means a close

*No, I won't tell you the joke about the 88-year-old rabbi. It's too long and it verges on the improper.

ISAAC ASIMOV

SCIENCE

companion is bound to hear it twenty-seven hundred times—hence can identify it from a distance on the basis of the tiniest of clues.

This rather strong reminder of my tendency to repeat myself made me a little self-conscious. After all, this essay you are now looking at is my 173rd monthly article for F & SF (roughly 700,000 words, for goodness' sake), and there is bound to be overlapping here and there. This essay and the previous one deal with microorganisms, for instance. Have I ever dealt with them before? I went over my list of F & SF essays, and it turns out that there were some comments about microorganisms in THAT'S LIFE (March, 1962) and in THE EGG AND WEE (June, 1962).

But the overlap isn't much. The approach and detail are quite different now, and it's been eleven years. So I will go on with my conscience in a state of chemically-clean purity.

In those early articles, for instance, I discussed the sizes of microorganisms, and I am going to do so now again, but for a different purpose.

Let's start with the one specific microorganism that everyone has heard of, if they've heard of any—the amoeba. An average amoeba is about 1/125 of an inch in diameter, but no one uses inches in making such measurements. If we switch to the metric system then we might use millimeters, each one of which is equal to about 1/25 of an inch. The diameter of the amoeba can then be said to be 1/5 of a millimeter, or, if you prefer, 0.2 millimeters.

It would be better, however, to use the millimicrometer (usually, but imperfectly, called the "millimicron") as the unit of measure. Since there are a million millimicrometers in the millimeter, we can say that the amoeba has a diameter of 200,000 millimicrometers.

The juxtaposition of 1/125 of an inch and 200,000 millimicrometers is just right. The diameter is the same expressed either way, but 1/125 shows the amoeba to be quite small on the ordinary scale and 200,000 shows it to be quite large on the submicroscopic scale. Since we are going to stay submicroscopic, let's stay with the millimicrometer as a unit, and let's avoid the boredom of repeating it each time by taking the word as understood.

The amoeba is composed of a single cell, and I won't define cell any further than to say that it is a blob of living matter enclosed in a membrane. The outsizeness of the amoeba-cell becomes apparent when I tell you that every one of the fifty trillion or so

cells in your body is smaller than the amoeba. The largest human cell (occurring in the female only) is the ovum, which has a diameter of about 140,000. An average human cell is more likely to have a diameter of about 55,000.

The difference in size is even more extreme if we consider volume rather than diameter. An amoeba is nearly four times the diameter of the average body cell, and that gives it roughly fifty times the volume. Yet the amoeba is no more completely alive than the body cell, merely for being larger, than a man is more completely alive than a mouse.

Yet we might reasonably suppose that there comes a time when a cell becomes so small that it can no longer be completely alive. There just isn't enough room in it to hold all the necessary paraphernalia of life, we might argue.

Consider, for instance, the red blood cells, of which there are roughly five million per cubic millimeter of blood. These are among the smallest cells of the human body, disc-shaped, and with a long diameter of only 7500. They *don't* have all the paraphernalia we usually associate with life.

The typical cell has a nucleus, a small body more or less in the center of the cell, and all else is "cytoplasm." The red blood cell has no nucleus and is essentially a bag of cytoplasm. Since it is the nucleus that contains the machinery for cell-division, the red blood cell, lacking a nucleus, can never divide. It does its work, carrying oxygen molecules from the lungs to the body cells until it wears out (after about three months), and then it is dismantled. The body doesn't run out of red blood cells, however, because more are continually being formed from precursors which *do* have nuclei.

It can be argued, and often is, that the red blood cell, although alive, is not a complete cell. In fact, it is sometimes denied the name and is called a red blood "corpuscle."

Nor is the red blood cell the smallest living unit in the body. The smallest of all (and present only in the male) is the sperm cell, which has a diameter of about 2,500, so that half a million of them could fit into a single amoeba.

The sperm cell is little more than half a nucleus and nothing else. With half a nucleus it can't divide, and with only a smidgeon of cytoplasm (in which the energy-producing apparatus of the cell exists) it can't stay alive long. It has just enough energy to make that mad race for the ovum (if one is in the vicinity) and, if superlatively lucky, enter and fertilize that ovum. If no ovum is

present or if some other candidate gets in first, the sperm cell dies.

In view of that, can one consider a sperm cell a complete cell? Perhaps not. After all, its sole purpose is to join another cell and become complete. And sheer size has nothing to do with it. The human ovum, which I mentioned before as the largest cell in the body also contains but half a nucleus, and cannot divide until a sperm enters and adds the other half.

Disregarding size, then, ought we to define a "complete cell" as one which has a complete nucleus, together with enough cytoplasm for adequate energy-production, so that it is able to divide?

If we do that, what do we do about the nerve cells and muscle cells in a human body? Both types of cells are so specialized that they have lost the capacity to divide even though both have perfectly good nuclei and perfectly adequate cytoplasm. Each nerve cell and muscle cell can live over a century, and many do, or the human being couldn't. It would be silly not to call them cells just because they don't divide, and, in fact, no physiologist denies them the name.

But if we don't insist on cell-division as the criterion for a complete cell, by what right do we deny that a red blood cell is complete? It doesn't have a nucleus, true, but it does what it is supposed to do efficiently for three months and it is unfair to ask more.

Let me suggest a different criterion for a complete cell, then.

The characteristic chemical substances of cells are the large molecules of nucleic acids and proteins. Certain proteins called "enzymes" catalyze specific reactions within cells. Without those enzymes in working order, a cell can't carry out the chemical reactions characteristic of life and, at best, can only live in a kind of suspended animation for a while.

As for the nucleic acids, they see to it that the proper enzymes are formed in the first place.

Without nucleic acids, a cell must make do on the enzymes already present while they last. With nucleic acids, a cell can live a long time because the nucleic acids can replace themselves and make enzymes, too, by building them out of the small molecules which are absorbed from the outside world. If it is not too specialized to undergo division, a cell with nucleic acid, with its descendants, can live indefinitely.

Let us define a complete cell, then, as one that has all the large molecules (enzymes and nucleic acids) that it needs for its normal

functions; or, if it doesn't have enough of either or both, one that can build up what it needs out of the small molecules in its environment.

An incomplete cell would be one which lacks some of the large molecules it needs and which cannot make them out of small molecules. Such a cell can only lie in suspended animation and eventually die, unless it succeeds in somehow making use of the large molecules in another cell different from itself. An incomplete cell, in other words, can only function if, for at least some part of its life, it is parasitic on a complete cell.

By this definition, the red blood cell is complete, but the ovum and sperm are each incomplete. Each of the latter two is a half-cell doomed to only a limited life-span until such time as they unite and become a complete cell, each depending, in part, on the large molecules of the other to make the fuller life possible.

The mutual parasitism of ovum and sperm is, however, a one-shot thing. Once combined, the "fertilized ovum" that results is permanently complete. Are there, on the other hand, fragments of life which are permanently incomplete; which parasitize complete cells without in any way becoming complete themselves through the process?

If such there are, we might suspect they would have to be smaller than the ordinary cells making up multicellular creatures such as ourselves. The human sperm cell with a diameter of 2500 is already so small that it can only hold half a nucleus and almost no cytoplasm. Anything that size or smaller (it might be reasoned) would have to be incomplete for simple lack of room for the minimum number of large molecules required for total cellular functioning.

This naturally brings us to the world of the bacteria, all of which are smaller than the human sperm. The largest bacteria are perhaps 1900 in diameter and 1000 might be considered average. And aren't they parasites? At least, most of us think of bacteria as living ruthlessly on living things, especially on ourselves.

But that is wrong. Most bacteria are "saprophytes," living on the dead remnants of living things. Even those that are parasitic in the sense that they flourish within living organisms, live on the small molecules present in these organisms—in the intestines, where they usually don't bother us; and sometimes in the blood, where they usually do.

Despite their small size, bacterial cells are complete. They need only a supply of small molecules, and out of those they can

manufacture all the large molecules they require. In some respects, their chemical versatility is greater than that of the larger cells that make up our bodies.

It is for this reason that bacteria, even those which are parasitic, can be cultured in the laboratory on artificial media which contain the small molecules they need. It is because they can be so cultured, and therefore studied in isolation, that late 19th Century medicine made its start toward conquering bacterial diseases.

But how can bacterial cells be complete when they are so tiny and so much smaller than the sperm cell which is only half a nucleus? The smallest known bacterium is the "pleuro-pneumonia organism," which has a diameter of only 150. Some 2000 of them can be squeezed into a space the size of a human sperm cell.

That sounds paradoxical, but we mustn't judge from the size of the nucleus needed to contain all the control-paraphernalia for an organism the size and complexity of human being with its tens of trillions of cooperating cells, the size of one needed to run a tiny blob of matter much smaller than any one of those cells. We might as well argue that, since a heart is necessary to the functioning of any mammal, no mammal smaller than the human heart (a mouse, for instance) can possibly exist. The mouse has a heart, too, but a much smaller one than we have.

Similarly, a bacterial cell has nuclear matter too, but it needs far less than our cells do, and what it has is enough for its purpose. I say "nuclear matter" because the bacterial cell has no distinct nucleus, but does have the nucleic acids usually found within the cell nucleus. These nucleic acids are located in bits throughout the bacterial cell. In this respect, bacteria resemble certain very simple plant cells called "blue-green algae" which are like bacteria structurally, except that they are somewhat larger and possess chlorophyll.

Bacteria and the blue-green algae apparently represent a very primitive stage in evolution. As cells grew larger and more complicated, the increasing quantity of nuclear matter necessary for enzyme manufacture was gathered into a compact nucleus so that cell division could take place flawlessly. Still, the mere fact that bacteria and blue-green algae are more primitive in this respect does not mean that such cells are less than complete, anymore than the fact that an earthworm is more primitive than you are makes it any the less a complete organism.

This brings us to Howard Taylor Ricketts, an American

pathologist who, about 70 years ago, tackled "Rocky Mountain spotted fever," a serious disease that killed twenty percent or more of those who contracted it.

Ricketts was able to show that spotted fever was primarily a disease of ticks and of the small animals whose blood they fed on. Sometimes cattle ticks would have it, and it was from those that human beings were most likely to catch the disease. Ricketts managed to locate the microorganism that caused the disease and showed that it was transmitted from tick to mammal and back to tick.

He then went on to study the even more widespread and serious disease, typhus, which was produced by a similar microorganism, one which primarily infested the body louse, and which was spread from human to human by the bite of that intimate little creature.

While studying typhus in Mexico City, Ricketts managed to contract the disease himself and died of it on May 3, 1910, at the age of 29. Mexico observed three days of mourning on his behalf. The organism of the type that causes Rocky Mountain spotted fever and typhus are called "rickettsiae" in his honor, and the diseases themselves are examples of "rickettsial diseases."

The rickettsiae look like small bacteria, with typical diameters of 475, *but* they cannot be cultured on artificial media the way other bacteria can. Rickettsiae remain in suspended life outside cells and can only grow *inside* the cells of the creatures they infect.

They apparently lack certain key enzymes necessary for growth and reproduction and cannot make them out of small molecules. Inside the cell they infect they can make use of the necessary enzymes present in that cell for their own purposes.

The rickettsiae, then, are examples of true incomplete cells, cells which parasitize complete cells, and which do not, in the process, become complete themselves.

Nor is it just a matter of size. A rickettsial cell has some thirty times the volume of a pleuro-pneumonia organisms and therefore can be supposed to have room for thirty times as many of each variety of large molecule. However, at least one key large molecule must be totally missing in the rickettsial cell while none are *totally* missing from the pleuro-pneumonia organism, so that the former is an incomplete cell and the latter a complete one.

What, then, of the viruses I talked about last month. William

Elford, as I said, filtered a suspension of the virus and held back the infective agent. He showed that viruses must be particles with a diameter of about 100—at least the one he worked with was. As it turns out, some are larger and are almost half the diameter of a rickettsial cell. Others, however, are considerably smaller. The tobacco necrosis virus, for instance, has a diameter of only 16.

Twenty-five thousand of the tobacco necrosis virus particles can be squeezed into a volume equal to that of a rickettsial cell; nearly four million into the volume of a human sperm cell; two trillion into the volume of an amoeba. Such a tiny virus, has indeed, only about fifteen times the volume of an average protein molecule.

It would seem, then, that the viruses must be incomplete cells that, like the rickettsiae, can only live within the cells they parasitize, but, being much smaller, cannot be detected either in or out of the cell by any ordinary microscope.

In fact, are they alive at all? Surely there must be a limit to how small an object can be and still be alive. The virus particles are so small they can contain very few molecules by ordinary cellular standards. How can there possibly be enough to give it the complex properties of life?

To be sure, viruses grow and multiply with ferocious speed once within a cell, and it is quite logical to assume that they are reorganizing the material they find into their own structure and doing so efficiently. Isn't that enough to make them alive? What more can any living organism do?

And yet there are no sharp boundaries in nature, and, if we stop to think of it, we must realize that in the course of the gradual evolution of large molecules out of small in the primordial ocean, there must have been a period when there were molecules or systems of molecules not complex enough to have gained all the properties we associate with life, yet complex enough to have gained some of them.

If there were this kind of sub-life, might it not be that the viruses are remnants that have survived to the present? In that case, might they belong to a special class of objects neither quite living nor quite non-living?

Where can we draw the line? Are the viruses the simplest form of life, the most complex form of non-life, or are they on the boundary line?

We switch to Wendell Meredith Stanley who, when he was an

undergraduate at Earlham College in Indiana, played football with great skill and whose ambition it was to be a football coach. However, while visiting the campus of the University of Illinois, he was so incautious as to get into a discussion with a professor of chemistry. This opened his eyes to a new interest and he never became a coach. He got his Ph.D. at Illinois, studied in Europe and, in 1931, went to Rockefeller Institute in New York.

Rockefeller Institute was a-buzz at the time with a novel biochemical feat, the crystallization of enzymes.

In a crystal, the component atoms, ions or molecules are arranged with great regularity. It is this regularity that gives the crystal its properties. Naturally, the larger and more complex a potential constituent particle happens to be, the more difficult it is to get a number of them to take up the necessary regular positions.

Nevertheless, by obtaining a sufficiently pure solution of a particular protein, even *its* molecules can be forced into crystalline position. In 1926, an enzyme named "urease" had been crystallized by James Batchellor Sumner, and this was the final proof that enzymes were proteins. In 1930, John Howard Northrop at Rockefeller Institute had crystallized the well-known digestive enzyme "pepsin."

With all the excitement concerning the crystallization of hitherto-uncrystallized biological materials, and some of it at the very institution in which Stanley was working, it occurred to him to try to crystallize a virus.

The tobacco mosaic virus seemed a good one to work with. A plant host was easier to work with than an animal host, and tobacco plants could be grown at the Institute's greenhouse. Stanley grew them, infected them with tobacco mosaic disease, harvested them, ground up the leaves, worked with the juice, went through all the steps known to concentrate and purify proteins.

Eventually, in 1935, from one ton of tobacco plants, he isolated a few grams of tiny white needles which represented the crystalline virus.

Stanley's discovery made the front page of the New York Times, and, eventually, in 1946, Sumner, Northrop and Stanley shared the Nobel Prize for Medicine and Physiology.

The virus crystals showed all the tests for protein, so the virus was essentially protein. So far, so good. The crystals would keep at low temperature, as proteins would, and even after a considerable period of storage, they remained infective. In fact, a given weight

of the crystallized virus was hundreds of times as infective as the typical solutions that had been worked with.

The fact that the virus could be kept for periods of time without losing infectivity (dying, in other words) was no real argument that the virus was not alive. Certain bacteria can form spores that can remain in suspended animation longer, and withstand harsher conditions, than a virus crystal can, yet no one denied the bacterial spore was alive.

No, it was the fact that viruses could be crystallized that seemed to argue they were not living things. Stanley, himself, led the fight in favor of the view that viruses, being subject to crystallization, could not be living.

But is that so? Until 1935, crystals, to be sure, had been associated entirely with non-living substances. They were most common in the field of inorganic substances where any pure compound could be crystallized, usually without trouble. Even organic crystals were made up of simple molecules that might be associated with life and might be found in living tissues, yet could not themselves be considered alive by any stretch of the imagination.

To take it to the pre-1935 extreme, the crystallized enzymes of Sumner and Northrop were made up of arrays of molecules that were unusually large and complex but that were still *not* living by any reasonable criterion.

The moment a virus was crystallized then, it could be argued and was, that a virus was *not* a living organism but a *non*-living protein molecule.

This seemed reasonable, for it seemed difficult to conceive of a crystallized organism. Can you imagine a crystalline humanity, for instance?

And yet there was a difference between a virus and a non-living protein molecule. Some protein molecules had as powerful an effect on an organism as a virus would. Some protein molecules killed quickly in very small quantities.

But there was one thing that no non-living protein molecule could do that a virus could. The non-living protein molecule could not make more of itself. A small quantity of protein might affect an organism, but then a small quantity of extract from that organism could not affect a second organism in the same way. In the case of the virus, however, infection could go from one organism to another to another to another idefinitely.

Besides, what is the magic of crystallization that separates it

from life? The key characteristic of a crystal is the orderly arrangement of its constituent particles, but why cannot those particles be living, if they happen to be simple enough in structure? Sufficient simplicity to crystallize and sufficient complexity to be alive are not really mutually exclusive as far as any law of nature is concerned. The two properties were just *assumed* to be mutually exclusive because until 1935, nothing had been known to possess both. And suppose viruses *do* possess both.

To show this is not ridiculous, let us be a little more liberal in what we consider crystals and ask again, as I did before, if we could imagine a crystalline humanity. Well, we can! I've seen samples myself!

Columns of soldiers marching along an avenue in review make up a sort of human crystal. The properties of a mass of ten thousand men, in regular rank and file, marching in step, are completely different from the properties of a mass of ten thousand men moving at will as a disorderly mob. Indeed, the almost-inevitable success of a trained army battalion against an equal number of equally armed civilians is partly the result of the fact that the properties of crystalline man are more suitable to organized warfare than those of mob-man.

For that matter, a squadron of aircraft flying in close formation have crystalline properties. Just imagine those same aircraft suddenly breaking formation and taking up random directions. The result could be instant disaster. It requires the crystalline properties of formation to make such close-quarters flight safe.

To my way of thinking, then, the fact that viruses can be crystallized is irrelevant to the larger problem of their living, or non-living, nature. We must look for other evidence, and in 1937, two years after the crystallization, Frederick C. Bawden and Norman W. Pirie, two English biochemists, showed that viruses are *not* entirely protein.

—But that's another story; next month's story.

Michael Coney ("Susanna, Susanna!" November 1972) returns with the first of three superior stories about a 21st century scientist who is received as a god in the far-future land of Finistelle. Here, then, is the first Tale of Finistelle. . .

The Manya

by MICHAEL G. CONEY

A LEGEND IS A UNIQUE thing, an individual thing told by individuals, one to another, to another.

The legend of the Lord of the Skies, which was born in the Year of Entrophy 5629, will flourish and grow—or has flourished and grown—since. (Uncertainty as to the tense of this statement is the result of uncertainty as to the nature of time. With the eventual realization of Wells' dream of a time machine in the year 2086 came the expected discovery that physical travel into the past was impossible; the paradoxes would not allow it. It was assumed, however, that travel into the future was possible because the travelers, together with their machines, never came back. It was further assumed that this was because, once the traveler was physically present in the future, the paradoxes of reversed time travel once more applied. So they must still be walking around, idiots among a race of supermen. . .)

The legend:

In the year of Entrophy 5629 there appeared in the evening sky above the Heights of Hurd in the Canton of Gota, in the land known as Finistelle, a bright light. The dunnet fishermen were riding the skies, four emerald balloons trailing prungle nets across the background of the Heights, waiting for the fat dunnet birds to come winging home to roost. The light appeared as a blazing, exploding rectangle, which flung many wondrous gifts around the area of the rain forest bordering the River Scraw. It is accepted that to this day many of the gifts have not been found.

Simultaneously, a God ma-

terialized in the drooping prungle net; a tall white God whose extra weight bore the net and its supporting balloons to the ground. The villagers of Poli were wailing with despair, because at first it was thought that the explosion represented the spontaneous combustion of one of the balloons, and therefore the death of one of their men. Then, on seeing the figure in the net, they began to wail with fear because the God, far from being a healthy green in complexion, was white like the albino *kraxa*, or forest wolf. All this happened long ago, or *yentro*, as they say in Finistelle (having little sense of time), and as the days and months went by the villagers lost much of their fear and began to acknowledge the value of their new God, who was good and kind and infinitely wise.

So runs the legend.

The facts:

Donald Lackland, scientist, proud and jilted lover, unable to lose himself in darkest Africa, which in the year 2086 AD possessed nuclear-powered street lighting throughout, took the new route to oblivion. He volunteered his services to Travel-On, Inc., as a guinea pig, signing the usual indemnity. He entered the company's Mark III without asking what had happened to Marks I and II. He thrust the selector lever forward blindly. (His eyes were misted with tears.)

He materialized in the future. He found that things had changed. Specifically, he found that he was some eight hundred feet above ground level, the landscape having subsided during the intervening years. As the force of gravity began to rectify this anomaly, he panicked and jumped from the Mark III, which malfunctioned behind him, spreading itself abruptly over the sky.

His fall, accompanied traditionally by a gurgling yell of terror, was halted by a resilient net. He bounced and hung there. The net was white, faintly sticky and of medium mesh, suitable for halibut. The ground was approaching with reassuring slowness now, and he looked up. The folds of the net were complex, but it basically took a rectangular configuration and was suspended at each corner by a vast green balloon. Cradled under each balloon was a small green man.

He reached the ground and stepped from the net, to be greeted by an advancing mob of shouting green humanoid creatures. Assuming that their cries signified blood lust he groped for his laser pistol. It was not there. It might be anywhere. He clenched his fists and prepared to die like a man.

Fortunately for Lackland it

was not hunger which prompted the creatures' shouting, but awe. Lackland was beyond their experience, being huge and white, and therefore must be a god. Legend had it that, if a god were ever to appear, then he would descend from the sky. It was hardly likely that he would crawl from a hole in the ground. That was not the way of Gods. *Sitwana*, as they say.

So Lackland was given a state welcome and borne in triumph back to the village of Poli. There was much feasting that night, and the new god was offered little green girls, which he disappointingly refused. How could the villagers know that he was already regretting his trip and was hungry for something larger and whiter, called Marion? They pressed another helping of dunnet stew on him, and hung noisome garlands around his neck. They wanted to make him welcome. They wanted him to stay. He was their rabbit's foot, their juju, their *manya*. He must, surely, be a more powerful *manya* than anything possessed by their nearest enemies, the bastard Hurds. Not to mention the malodorous men of Breda.

With reasonable luck he could be the strongest *manya* in the Canton of Gota, and would strike fear into the bladders of their enemies. He certainly struck fear into their own bladders, and were they not the most courageous village in the whole of Finistelle?

As the months went by, Lackland settled in and mastered the language and was able to assure the Poli villagers of his good intentions.

"God Lackland," said the village chief Dongo one bright morning in spring, "when will you lead us against the Hurds?" He pointed to the sheer, seven hundred foot cliff in the distance.

Lackland shivered, chewing on a dunnet leg. "I am a man of peace," he said. He was also afraid of heights. "I have come to persuade the villages to live in harmony."

"It is spring and our young men are restless," pursued Dongo. "We are growing flabby and contented, and easy meat for the Hurds, who eat human flesh. Also, Hurd women are attractive."

Aka, captain of balloons, joined the discussion. "Last evening the Hurds were assembled at the top of the heights," he said gravely. "They had bows and arrows with them, and they shot at my balloons. They missed."

"The women of Breda are attractive too," remarked the chief thoughtfully.

"Atta, atta!" agreed the balloon captain.

"To what, uh, *race* do they belong?" asked Lackland, also thoughtful, regarding the small green Aka with sudden interest.

"Race?"

"What *color* are they?" Irritation merged with embarrassment in Lackland's tone. "How big?"

"Like us, Your Godship. Beautiful."

"Oh." Lackland looked stern. "I have told you before, all men are brothers. It is wrong to fight your brothers."

"Women are not our brothers," Dongo pointed out logically. "They are not our sisters either, if they are from a different village. Of that you can be sure."

Later Lackland talked to Akasette, the balloon captain's daughter. "Why do your people think always of war?" he asked.

The little girl looked at him in surprise. "War is the way," she answered simply, as though repeating an axiom. "*Sitwa.*"

Akasette was nine years old and, having reached puberty, wore a bright blouse above her sarong, dyed yellow with *flunga* mud. As she bent forward to illustrate strategy with a pointed stick in the dust, little green breasts peeped from beneath her neckline. Lackland sighed.

"Such is not the way, *sitwana,*" he said. He liked Akasette and had spent many hours talking with her since his arrival at the village. She was unspoiled, as yet not too affected by her primitive environment. She repeated her views on war as something she had learned by rote, but not yet seen the sense of. There was still time for her to unlearn.

"This is a big country," said Lackland. "There is food for all. Everyone can live in peace, if he wants it so. Nobody need die. In the land from which I come, *yentro*, nobody fights, and machines do all the work. It is a good life because we have no more wars and can devote ourselves to being happy. We used to kill one another once, and we built machines which could kill many men all at one time, but now there are no such machines. Not even bows and arrows."

"So why did you come here, God Lackland?" asked Akasette.

Unwisely he told her the story of Marion.

"So you are looking for a woman," Akasette said. "There are plenty of women here and you will be very happy." She smiled shyly. "I myself will be a woman and ready for bedding in a year, and I will be looking for a man."

Lackland regarded her, and was sad. She was a small green girl, and as time had gone by since his arrival, she, and the other villagers, had looked less

green to his accustoming eyes. But the life span of the people was short. She was a small green girl, and, he knew, she would stay that way until a small green man took her to bed. He would be surprised that one so young could act that way, and would unreasoningly think less of her for it—then very soon she would be a little old green woman, then dead. He operated on a different time scale. He was just different. . . .

"I am a god," he said with no pride.

"I am sorry," she replied, ashamed of her own temerity. "But you will still teach me the ways of your people?"

"Of course. And when you get older and bed a wise man, you will teach him too, and he will teach others."

"And then there will be no more wars?"

"No more wars," Lackland assured her, with a confidence he did not feel.

As spring progressed towards summer, it was a tribute to Lackland's efforts that the spears of the Poli warriors remained unbloodied. In the evenings he spoke to the village, his pale face crimson in the glow from the central fire, while the people listened from the doors of their *dweldas.* In the afternoons the young men rattled their spears and looked towards the Heights of Hurd, but soon it was evening again, and the globba balloons descended with their catch of dunnets, and it was time for eating and talking.

"If you string your bows *so,*" Lackland told them, "and twist in the arrow *so,* then work it to and fro like this on a piece of dry wood, then you can light a fire easily. The forest is wet, and it takes a long time to light a fire with stones, when your tinder is damp. Now, watch. . . This is what bows are for. They are machines for peace. I will tell you about the wild white bomb, and how my people tamed it. . ."

And so it went on, and so the annual spring war was averted. Occasionally Akasette, a willing pupil, would also attempt to address the fireside gatherings, but she met with scant success, failing to hold her audience. She was a child, and her brief talks in the cause of peace were deemed insulting by the older villagers. Only her relationship with Lackland prevented the muttering listeners from meting out rough retaliation for her impudence.

"She shames us," explained Dongo. "She is a child. She has never known the glory of battle."

"And," said Lumbo, prungle netsman, "she does not know the deep forest where the

prungle dwells in his great net. When I take my men into the trees to gather nets for the skyfishermen, it is necessary that they know how to use their spears. War is not the only purpose of weapons."

The prungle is a giant carnivorous spider which weaves its tough web among the trees. It resents the removal of its nets for other purposes.

A bleeding scout reeled into the village and collapsed before Dongo's *dwelda.*

"The men of Breda prepare," he gasped. "And they have a mighty *manya.*"

"So have we," replied Dongo confidently, meaning Lackland. He brought his spear from his hut and spat on the flint point, polishing it. He sized up the bringer of tidings for a practice jab—bleeding men are a liability, as they require food and water before they die.

"Hold it!" said Lackland. "What sort of *manya?*" he asked the messenger.

"A mighty *manya,*" repeated the man, talking fast but delaying his punch line and, he correctly assumed, his death. "It has destroyed the village of Hurri; the *dweldas* are broken and the people are killed. Except the women, and they are gone. There is a great stench."

"What sort of *manya?*" asked Lackland again, patiently.

"*Kraxa-kraxa,*" the man grunted, metaphorically pinned down.

The *kraxa* is the terror of the rain forest, a giant white wolf more feared even than the prungle. It is, so Lackland had been reliably informed, twice the height of a man and impervious to spears. It kills swiftly and silently, springing in a flash of white light and devouring instantly. It has huge ivory fangs and, predictably, crimson eyes of flame. Lackland had never seen any sign of one, not so much as a giant dropping. He was not an unduly sceptical man, but he had his reservations as to the *kraxa.*

"You mean they've trained one?" he asked.

"It obeys the command of the Breda warriors," the messenger stated. "And there is more to tell," he added hastily, as Dongo's spear twitched.

"Then tell it," snapped the chief.

"While I lay hidden, I heard them talking. Now that they have this mighty *manya,* they intend to take all of Gota. They will capture Poli, and even Kraa, at the coast."

"Capture Kraa?" Dongo was outraged. "Kraa is our capital. The capital of the canton, which sends to us for tribute and taxes."

"You pay them, I trust?" Lackland surmised.

"Of course, although it has happened that their tax collectors have sickened and died on the return journey. Such is the way, *sitwa.* But to talk of capturing Kraa!"

"But first," said the scout eagerly, "they have a plan to deal with Poli."

"And what is that?"

"That I will tell you," said the scout. "In due course," he added sensibly. "Now I feel faint, and would like to rest."

Dongo allowed the man the use of a well-equipped *dwelda* and two nubile young nurses in order that his recovery might be speedily effected.

Later, the scout still professing illness, Lackland spoke to Akasette. "If you wanted to take this village, what would you do?"

The little girl regarded him in surprise. "I already have the village," she said, and truthfully, because many youths were admiring her budding form and counting the days to her adulthood. (Inasmuch as Poli youths can count.) Even Dongo was wont to rest his hand on her head in paternal fashion from time to time.

"I mean if you were an enemy and wanted to destroy us."

She frowned in puzzlement, wrestling with the concept. Then her expression cleared. "I would fire the globba fields," she said. "And the wind might well carry the flames through the village."

The globbas grew to the southwest of the village; they were giant hydrogen-filled plants which hovered a few feet above the ground, tethered by a single slender root. They were cultivated by the villagers for use, when they had attained their full diameter of thirty feet, as balloons for the dunnet fishermen.

"We must protect the globbas," said Lackland.

The plan of the Bredan warriors was never revealed, as the bleeding messenger died during the night, having, presumably, made the most of his last few hours. The nurses brought the news to Dongo.

"Never mind," he said airily, "for God Lackland also has a plan. We are saved." Then, hedging his bets, he asked, "Did the scout by any chance reveal what the warriors of Breda intend to us?"

"He did not speak of that," the older of the two nurses replied. "He was a man of deeds rather than words."

"Right to the end," added the younger nurse in admiration.

"Round up the women," Dongo instructed the ex-nurses. "There is work to do." Work, traditionally, was done by

women, while men fought to protect the village. This system, it had been found, resulted in fewer wars.

A score of women were equipped with wooden spades and set digging on the perimeter of the globba fields under the supervision of Lackland.

"Are the workers to your liking, God Lackland?" asked Dongo, as they watched the women toiling, stripped to the waist.

Lackland glanced at the chief suspiciously. "They work well," he replied noncommittally. "But where are the men? We need more people digging."

"Such is not the way, *sitwana*," said Dongo firmly.

Some two dozen globbas swayed in the field. Carefully cultivated and fertilized with human dung, they varied in size and age. One by one they were to be used as replacements for the dunnet balloons—their degree of ripeness was a matter for careful judgment entrusted to an elder in the village named Ubato. It was a tribute to Ubato's skill that he had survived his profession to reach an advanced age.

When ripe, the globba sheds its root and rises into the sky, eventually to explode and scatter spores over a wide area. The danger to the dunnet fisherman is apparent. Should he take to the sky in an overripe globba due to an error in Ubato's judgment, he may also find himself scattered over a wide area.

Ubato's predecessor had been guilty of an error and had been executed according to custom. Custom dictates that a convicted man is sent skywards on a balloon draped with prungle net, which is set ablaze on lift-off. The criminal climbs to the top of the globba and perches there, screaming pointlessly, while the flames rise towards him. When the globba reaches a height of some two hundred feet, the flames will reach the man. He then may burn, or he may jump—if the globba has not exploded in the meantime. Such is the way, *sitwa*.

But Ubato was skillful, successful and respected, although prone to a distressing nervous twitch which from time to time convulsed his right hand—his globba-root testing hand—like a jolt of high voltage.

Akasette joined Dongo and Lackland. "You are not digging?" asked Lackland.

"I am not yet a woman, therefore I am exempt," she replied. "What is the purpose of this?"

Lackland explained. "We are digging a trench around the globba field; on the bottom of the trench we will set spikes,

then we will cover the trench with brushwood and leaves, so that it is indistinguishable from the soil around. When the men of Breda come to fire the fields, they will fall into the trench and die on the spikes."

"Or merely injure themselves," said Dongo hopefully, "in which case we shall be obliged to execute them. It is a wonderful scheme, God Lackland."

"You've never used this method for hunting?"

"We never hunt," said Dongo scornfully. "We are sky fishermen. Hunting is for the dogs. We are for the birds."

The rain was falling heavily, and the women had by now stripped completely; small and green and naked, they looked like busy dryads.

Akasette appeared worried. "Are you sure this will protect the globbas from the *manya*, God Lackland?"

Lackland smiled indulgently. "The warriors of Breda have no *manya*, Akasette. Even if they have, the forest dog *kraxa* will die in our trench like a man. And should it leap the pit, it has no fire to ignite the globbas."

"The *kraxa-kraxa* has fire," objected Akasette.

"*Kraxa-kraxa?* What is that?"

Akasette pointed up at the black, leaking clouds. "White fire from the sky. It strikes quickly and terribly, like the *kraxa.*"

Lackland laughed. "Lightning only strikes the tall trees. There is no way it can be controlled by the men of Breda. Tell me, has the *kraxa-kraxa* ever struck the globbas before?"

"No," the girl admitted.

In two days the trench was completed, the stakes set in position, the brushwood and leaves scattered over. The trap was complete. At this point Dongo expressed a desire for proof of effectiveness in the nature of a trial run with a volunteer whose name he supplied, but he was dissuaded by Lackland.

The villagers of Poli were delighted with the trap.

"And the men of Breda are hunters," cried a warrior, prancing before the evening fire, "and it seems to me we could set such traps on their paths in the forest. Many would die of their wounds."

"Also the men of Hurd," shouted another, "who fish in the River Scraw for the fangsnapper. A party can scale the Heights of Hurd and dig pits near the upper river. I will go and dig myself, although I am a man," he added, transported by enthusiasm.

"For Christ's sake," muttered Lackland in English. He stood, tall and crimson in the

firelight. "Listen to me, my people," he called, and they were silent. "I have told you before that as long as I remain with you as your *manya* and your God, then Poli does not make war."

"But the traps we have dug around the globbas are war," said someone. "They were good war, being safe for us."

"There is a difference," shouted Lackland. "The difference between attack and defense. Between wrong and right."

"What is the difference?" came a voice.

Lackland reached his brains for simple terms. "Attack comes first," he said. "If you are attacked, then you defend yourself, which is your right."

"The warriors of Breda think it is their right to attack," said Dongo. "And we considered that such was our right also, until your Godship arrived. Have you then taken our right away from us?"

"It is not the right of Breda to attack," replied Lackland forcibly.

Dongo sighed. "Perhaps your Godship would care to tell them that," he said. "I feel in my bladder that it would carry more weight, coming from one such as you."

Trapped, Lackland agreed. "I will tell them. Hear this!" he shouted. "Tomorrow we go to the village of Breda on a peace mission. I will talk at length with their chief, and he will agree never again to attack Poli, or smash your *dweldas*, or steal your women. In the land from which I come this is the way we solve our difficulties, *sitwa*. We talk, not fight. Everyone is happy."

"Atta, atta!" cried Dongo.

There was a muttering from the women. "Why, then, have we dug the pits?" one asked sullenly. "My hands have many blisters of a size like globbas." A murmur of agreement followed this complaint.

"Small animals cannot now get at the balloons," replied Lackland. "And remember, there are still the warriors of Hurd to contend with."

"They shoot arrows at my equipment," volunteered Aka the balloon captain. "But they miss."

"If we are at peace with Breda," said Dongo, inspired by a new strategy, "then we can march on Hurd together, as allies."

"All that is in the future," said Lackland guardedly.

The following morning the peace mission assembled.

"Unfortunately I cannot come," remarked Dongo, "for I have the sickness *aik*, and must remain in my *dwelda*. Nevertheless be assured, God Lackland, that my thoughts will be

with you. Forever." With this he disappeared into his hut, nursing his stomach.

Lackland surveyed his mission, which now consisted of seven men.

"It is a strange thing that the sickness *aik* is passed from one man to another," remarked one of the men. He rubbed his stomach.

"March!" shouted Lackland, striding into the forest.

The village of Breda is situated on the far side of the River Scraw from Poli, at a distance of some ten miles. This was the first time Lackland had penetrated deep into the forest, and he found the eerie damp quietness unnerving. There were few birds.

"All have been eaten by the vile prungle," his guide informed him. The guide was Lumbo the netsman, learned in the way of prungles. The other members of the team shivered in ritual fashion, with a chattering of teeth.

The nets were everywhere, grey and sticky, slung between trees from a dipping, stronger strand. Among the branches the vague shapes of the prungles watched their passing with jutting eyestalks. Occasionally one glided from concealment hopefully, swaying on chitinous claws, a giant globular body with a smaller head, all covered with coarse red hairs. Lumbo relished the effect these appearances had on his companions.

"First they grip, then they bite," he explained, "and your body will swell like a globba, turning blue. Then they suck, and leave an empty bag of skin, light to carry. I have lost three men this season to the prungle, and there was little left of them for cremation."

Lackland was relieved when the trees thinned and they reached the banks of the River Scraw.

"Which is full of fangsnappers," Lumbo explained, picking his way upstream. "But fortunately there is a shallow crossing. The men of Hurd eat the fangsnapper," he added, "which is a shameful way to live. When Breda is our ally, we will together show Hurd better ways. Although the men of Breda hunt," he concluded with distaste. "That also is unpleasant; they eat the grunter, which tastes much like the flesh of men, when properly seasoned."

Lackland forbore to ask any further questions, concentrating on his balance as they crossed the seething waters on a series of unstable stones. The claws of giant lobsters clicked vainly at their shadows.

It was midafternoon before Lackland and his team halted,

their guide holding up his hand. "I smell Breda," he said unnecessarily.

Lackland peered through the trees. The village was about the same size as Poli; a few emerald children played in the dirt. The skies had cleared and the sunlight squeezed steam from the leaf roofs of the *dweldas* as the women sat chattering before their doorways. It was a peaceful scene.

He moved forward. "We go," he said.

"We stay," said Lumbo nervously.

Lackland glanced scornfully at his cowering troops and walked towards the circle of *dweldas*, shouting a greeting.

There was some consternation in the village as the women caught sight of him; they jumped to their feet, snatching up their infants, and watched him guardedly.

"I am God Lackland, from the village of Poli," he informed them grandly. "Take me to your chief."

"Our chief is away," a woman replied. "Also our menfolk."

"We have heard of you, large one," said another, "yet we are not afraid." She examined him with interest. "We are women and unprotected, and no doubt you will have your way with us," she invited, "but when our chief returns with his mighty *manya* you will be destroyed, God or no. As your village will be destroyed."

"What do you mean?"

The woman smiled. "Tonight, Poli will be no more. Our chief has promised." She considered for a moment. "So you will have nowhere to go, God Lackland. Stay with us for a while. If we find you pleasing, we will recommend mercy when our men return. Do not concern yourself with Poli. Villages are built, and villages are destroyed. *Sitwa.*"

Lackland left Breda at a run.

"Hurry!" he told his shivering disciples. "Back to Poli. The men of Breda are attacking."

They showed a certain reluctance. "Which means they have left their women in the village," observed Lumbo. "Alone."

Lackland snarled and kicked him. "Get going!"

They made the journey in record time for the distance, arriving in Poli before nightfall.

To their surprise the village was still standing. Akasette ran to greet Lackland. "You are back," she said, as though it were a miracle.

Dongo followed up. "You bring news of peace?"

"Uh, war, I regret," replied Lackland. He glanced at the deepening shadows around the village. "You have seen nothing of the warriors of Breda?"

The chief also peered into the gloom, nervously. "No." After a moment's tense pause he asked, "Why are we staring at the trees, God Lackland?"

"I believe they harbor the warriors of Breda."

"Unk," ejaculated the chief in dismay.

"Dongo," said Lackland patiently, "I can't make you out. Sometimes you cry for war, other times you urge peace. Tell me now, what do you want?"

The chief was saved the problem of replying. Shrill cries sounded in the distance.

"Arouse your warriors," snapped Lackland. "The men of Breda attack."

There was an explosive *whump!* and a column of fire rose bright against the darkening sky.

"They're firing the globba fields!" cried Dongo. "So much for your trenches, God Lackland!" He ran among the *dweldas* shouting, arousing drowsy young men, waving his spear, jabbing at those who lounged about the fireside. A posse was quickly formed. Led by Dongo, they disappeared towards the flames.

"Are you not going with them, God Lackland?" asked Akasette.

He looked into her worried face. "I will stay here and protect the women," he said. "Tell them to get their knives ready."

"What for?"

"To fight, of course. To the death, if needs be."

"Women do not fight," replied Akasette simply. "We work. If our men are conquered, then we go with the conquerors. *Sitwa.* One man is much like another."

The flames leaped higher and the din of battle increased. Lackland peered through the gaps in the *dweldas*, occasionally catching glimpses of tiny figures silhouetted against the flames, stabbing, hacking.

There was a pause, noise ceased apart from the dull booming of exploding globbas. Then a chorus of triumphant shouts. Lackland tensed, gripping a spear as a rabble of yelling men burst into the village. He eyed them apprehensively as they approached.

They were the warriors of Breda.

They stood proudly in the center of the circle of *dweldas*, spears held high. Their leader, face stained yellow with *flunga*, uttered a great cry.

"Poli is ours! Kneel before your masters, women!" Then he caught sight of Lackland. "You," he called. "The God Lackland of whom we have heard so much. Come to me and kneel, then feel the power

of our *manya!*" He waved a glittering hand.

"Oh, Christ," muttered Lackland as he saw.

While he hesitated, the gnome-like ocher figure of the Breda chief trotted forward, right arm raised. "Die, God!" he yelled, and a terrible flame darted from his fingers.

A small light body crashed into Lackland, and he fell, hearing the dreadful sizzling of flesh; as he struggled to rise, to run, a light tenacious web fell about him, hampering. Then a bright flash exploded in his head and dimmed to a long blackness.

"I am sorry for your wound," said Dongo. "My warriors attacked all they could see, being commendably thorough."

Lackland lifted his aching head and stared about the dim interior of the malodorous *dwelda*. "What happened?" he asked.

"We vanquished the warriors of Breda, due to a clever plan of our balloon captain Aka. As he and his team were descending from the evening's skyfishing with their catch, they observed what was happening below. So, when the men of Breda were assembled within the village, they cut loose the prungle net which dropped, trapping all on whom it fell. Then my men, who had . strategically withdrawn, moved in," concluded Dongo proudly.

"We even captured their mighty *manya*," he added, "which can fire globbas at a distance, and men too, it seems."

He held it out, shining metal. Lackland was silent.

"It is a great weapon, greater by far than the bow and arrow, is this *kraxa-kraxa*, worthy, perhaps, of your own culture of which you have told us, God Lackland. Except," amended Dongo, "that you do not have weapons. You do not fight. Nevertheless this *manya* is now ours and will be of great use to us."

"I'll take that, Dongo," said Lackland firmly, stretching out his arm.

It was good to feel the laser pistol in his hand again. He slipped it under the rough pillow.

He looked around at the small figures; Dongo the chief, Aka the balloon captain, Ubato the globba judge; they were watching him, seeming to expect some comment on the weapon. Maybe he should do some explaining. "Ask Akasette to come," he said, needing the reassurance of a sympathetic listener.

"Akasette cannot come," said her father Aka sadly, "being dead."

"What?"

"She jumped in front of you and took the magic of the *manya*," explained Dongo. "It was a mighty blow and she burned like a bush. *Sitwa.* However, she was of little account, being a woman. Not even that, for she had not reached the age of bedding."

Lackland closed his eyes on a blinding mist of wetness.

The Mad Old Man

"Stars," He said, "are the entrances to hell,
better known as the created universe,
rings of fire through which falling angels fall
into the matter trap." I called my horse
with my mindwhistle, frightened by the fierce
look on His face, by His flaring, flaming eyes,
and flew back to my golden tower of verse
somewhere on the other side of Paradise.
I drew a cloak of dreams about my thoughts
but fiery moths came, hungry and insane,
and made a ragged mockery of my nights.
I sought the mad old Man but He was gone
and I suspect that He has fallen through
the holes in His head and that I may too.

—WALTER H. KERR

Many of Harlan Ellison's stories have been called daring or ambitious, but this one, we feel, goes beyond those two well worn adjectives. The author has called it, in some ways, the bottom line personal statement of all his work. It concerns the depth of love we should have for ourselves as a species, and yet many will find the premise outrageous, in that it attempts a transposition of man's most hallowed beliefs. We think that you'll find it a striking performance.

The Deathbird

by HARLAN ELLISON

1

THIS IS A TEST. Take notes. This will count as ¾ of your final grade. Hints: remember, in chess, kings cancel each other out and cannot occupy adjacent squares, are therefore all-powerful and totally powerless, cannot affect one another, produce stalemate. Hinduism is a polytheistic religion; the sect of Atman worships the divine spark of life within Man; in effect saying, "Thou art God." Provisos of equal time are not served by one viewpoint having media access to two hundred million people in prime time while opposing viewpoints are provided with a soapbox on the corner. Not everyone tells the truth. Operational note: these sections may be taken out of numerical sequence: rearrange to suit yourself for optimum clarity. Turn over your test papers and begin.

2

Uncounted layers of rock pressed down on the magma pool. White-hot with the bubbling ferocity of the molten nickel-iron core, the pool spat and shuddered, yet did not pit or char or smoke or damage in the slighest the smooth and reflective surfaces of the strange crypt.

Nathan Stack lay in the crypt—silent, sleeping.

A shadow passed through rock. Through shale, through coal, through marble, through

mica schist, through quartzite; through miles-thick deposits of phosphates, through diatomaceous earth, through feldspars, though diorite; through faults and folds, through anticlines and monoclines, through dips and synclines; through hellfire; and came to the ceiling of the great cavern and passed through; and saw the magma pool and dropped down; and came to the crypt. The shadow.

A triangular face with a single eye peered into the crypt, saw Stack, and lay four-fingered hands on the crypt's cool surface. Nathan Stack woke at the touch, and the crypt became transparent; he woke though the touch had not been upon his body. His soul felt the shadowy pressure and he opened his eyes to see the leaping brilliance of the world-core around him, to see the shadow with its single eye staring in at him.

The serpentine shadow enfolded the crypt; its darkness flowed upward again, through the Earth's mantle, toward the crust, toward the surface of the cinder, the broken toy that was the Earth.

When they reached the surface, the shadow bore the crypt to a place where the poison winds did not reach, and caused it to open.

Nathan Stack tried to move, and moved only with difficulty. Memories rushed through his head of other lives, many other lives, as many other men; then the memories slowed and melted into a background tone that could be ignored.

The shadow thing reached down a hand and touched Stack's naked flesh. Gently, but firmly, the thing helped him to stand, and gave him garments, and a neck-pouch that contained a short knife and a warming-stone and other things. He offered his hand, and Stack took it, and after two hundred and fifty thousand years sleeping in the crypt, Nathan Stack stepped out on the face of the sick planet Earth.

Then the thing bent low against the poison winds and began walking away. Nathan Stack, having no other choice, bent forward and followed the shadow creature.

3

A messenger had been sent for Dira and he had come as quickly as the meditations would permit. When he reached the Summit, he found the fathers waiting, and they took him gently into their cove, where they immersed themselves and began to speak.

"We've lost the arbitration," the coil-father said. "It will be necessary for us to go and leave it to him."

Dira could not believe it. "But didn't they listen to our arguments, to our logic?"

The fang-father shook his head sadly and touched Dira's shoulder. "There were... accomodations to be made. It was their time. So we must leave."

The coil-father said, "We've decided you will remain. One was permitted, in caretakership. Will you accept our commission?

It was a very great honor, but Dira began to feel the loneliness even as they told him they would leave. Yet he accepted. Wondering why they had selected *him*, of all their people. There were reasons, there were always reasons, but he could not ask. And so he accepted the honor, with all its attendant sadness, and remained behind when they left.

The limits of his caretakership were harsh, for they insured he could not defend himself against whatever slurs or legends would be spread, nor could he take action unless it became clear the trust was being breached by the other—who now held possession. And he had no threat save the Deathbird. A final threat that could be used only when final measures were needed: and therefore too late.

But he was patient. The most patient of all his people.

Thousands of years later, when he saw how it was destined to go, when there was no doubt left how it would end, he understood *that* was the reason he had been chosen to stay behind.

But it did not help the loneliness.

Nor could it save the Earth. Only Stack could do that.

4

1 Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said unto the woman, Yea hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?

2 And the woman said unto the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden:

3 But of the fruit of the tree which is *in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die.*

4 And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die:

5 (Omitted)

6 And when the woman saw that the tree was *good for food, and that it* was *pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make* one *wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat.*

7 (Omitted)

8 (Omitted)

9 And the LORD God called unto Adam, and said unto him, Where art *thou?*

10 (Omitted)

11 And he said, Who told thee that thou wast *naked? Hast thou eaten of the tree, whereof I commanded thee that thou shouldest not eat?*

12 And the man said, The woman whom thou gavest to be *with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat.*

13 And the LORD God said unto the woman, What is *this* that *thou hast done? And the woman said, The serpent beguiled me, and I did eat.*

14 And the LORD God said unto the serpent, Because thou hast done this, thou art *cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field; upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life:*

15 And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.

GENESIS, Chap. II

TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

(Give 5 points per right answer.)

1. Melville's *Moby Dick* begins, "Call me Ishmael." We say it is told in the *first* person. In what person is Genesis told? From whose viewpoint?

2. Who is the "good guy" in this story? Who is the "bad guy?" Can you make a strong case for reversal of the roles?

3. Traditionally, the apple is considered to be the fruit the serpent offered to Eve. But apples are not endemic to the Near East. Select one of the following, more logical substitutes, and discuss how myths come into being and are corrupted over long periods of time: olive, fig, date, pomegranate.

4. Why is the word LORD always in capitals and the name God always capitalized? Shouldn't the serpent's name be capitalized, as well? If no, why?

5. If God created everything (see *Genesis*, Chap. I), why did he create problems for himself by creating a serpent who would lead his creations astray? Why did God create a tree he did not want Adam and Eve to know about, and then go out of his way to warn them against it?

6. Compare and contrast Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling panel of the *Expulsion from Paradise* with Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights.*

7. Was Adam being a gentleman when he placed blame on Eve? Who was Quisling? Discuss "narking" as a character flaw.

8. God grew angry when he found out he had been defied. If God is omnipotent and omniscient, didn't he know? Why couldn't he find Adam and Eve when they hid?

9. If God had not wanted Adam and Eve to taste the fruit of the forbidden tree, why didn't he warn the serpent? Could God have prevented the serpent from tempting Adam and Eve? If yes, why didn't he? If no, discuss the possibility the serpent was as powerful as God.

10. Using examples from two different media journals, demonstrate the concept of "slanted news."

5

The poison winds howled and tore at the powder covering the land. Nothing lived there. The winds, green and deadly, dived out of the sky and raked the carcass of the Earth, seeking, seeking: anything moving, anything still living. But there was nothing. Powder. Talc. Pumice.

And the onyx spire of the mountain toward which Nathan Stack and the shadow thing had moved, all that first day. When night fell they dug a pit in the tundra and the shadow thing coated it with a substance thick as glue that had been in Stack's neck-pouch. Stack had slept the night fitfully, clutching the warming-stone to his chest and breathing through a filter tube from the pouch.

Once he had awakened, at the sound of great batlike creatures flying overhead; he had seen them swooping low, coming in flat trajectories across the wasteland toward his pit in the earth. But they seemed unaware that he—and the shadow thing—lay in the hole. They defecated thin, phosphorecent stringers that fell glowing through the night and were lost on the plains; then the creatures swooped upward and were whirled away on the winds. Stack resumed sleeping with difficulty.

In the morning, frosted with an icy light that gave everything a blue tinge, the shadow thing scrabbled its way out of the choking powder and crawled along the ground, then lay flat, fingers clawing for purchase in the whiskaway surface. Behind it, from the powder, Stack bore toward the surface, reached up a hand and trembled for help.

The shadow creature slid across the ground, fighting the winds that had grown stronger in the night, back to the soft place that had been their pit, to the hand thrust up through the powder. It grasped the hand, and Stack's fingers tightened convulsively. Then the crawling shadow exerted pressure and pulled the man from the treacherous pumice.

Together they lay against the earth, fighting to see, fighting to draw breath without filling their lungs with suffocating death.

"Why is it like this. . .what *happened?*" Stack screamed against the wind. The shadow creature did not answer, but it looked at Stack for a long moment and then, with very careful movements, raised its hand, held it up before Stack's eyes and slowly, making claws of the fingers, closed the four fingers into a cage, into a fist,

into a painfully tight ball that said more eloquently than words: *destruction.*

Then they began to crawl toward the mountain.

6

The onyx spire of the mountain rose out of hell and struggled toward the shredded sky. It was monstrous arrogance. Nothing should have tried that climb out of desolation. But the black mountain had tried, and succeeded.

It was like an old man. Seamed, ancient, dirt caked in striated lines, autumnal, lonely; black and desolate, piled strength upon strength. It would *not* give in to gravity and pressure and death. It struggled for the sky. Ferociously alone, it was the only feature that broke the desolate line of the horizon.

In another twenty-five million years the mountain might be worn as smooth and featureless as a tiny onyx offering to the deity night. But though the powder plains swirled and the poison winds drove the pumice against the flanks of the pinnacle, thus far their scouring had only served to soften the edges of the mountain's profile, as though divine intervention had protected the spire.

Lights moved near the summit.

7

Stack learned the nature of the phosphorecent stringers defecated onto the plain the night before by the batlike creatures. They were spores that became, in the wan light of day, strange bleeder plants.

All around them as they crawled through the dawn, the little live things sensed their warmth and began thrusting shoots up through the talc. As the fading red ember of the dying sun climbed painfully into the sky, the bleeding plants were already reaching maturity.

Stack cried out as one of the vine tentacles fastened around his ankle, holding him. A second looped itself around his neck.

Thin films of berry-black blood coated the vines, leaving rings on Stack's flesh. The rings burned terribly.

The shadow creature slid on its belly and pulled itself back to the man. Its triangular head came close to Stack's neck, and it bit into the vine. Thick black blood spurted as the vine parted, and the shadow creature rasped its razor-edged teeth back and forth till Stack was able to breathe again. With a violent movement Stack folded himself down and around,

pulling the short knife from the neck-pouch. He sawed through the vine tightening inexorably around his ankle. It screamed as it was severed, in the same voice Stack had heard from the skies the night before. The severed vine writhed away, withdrawing into the talc.

Stack and the shadow thing crawled forward once again, low, flat, holding onto the dying earth: toward the mountain. High in the bloody sky, the Deathbird circled.

8

On their own world, they had lived in luminous, oily-walled caverns for millions of years, evolving and spreading their race through the universe. When they had had enough of empire-building, they turned inward, and much of their time was spent in the intricate construction of songs of wisdom, and the designing of fine worlds for many races.

There were other races that designed, however. And when there was a conflict over jurisdiction, an arbitration was called, adjudicated by a race whose *raison d'etre* was impartiality and cleverness unraveling knotted threads of claim and counter-claim. Their racial honor, in fact, depended on the flawless application of these qualities. Through the centuries they had refined their talents in more and more sophisticated arenas of arbitration until the time came when they were the final authority. The litigants were compelled to abide by the judgments, not merely because the decisions were always wise and creatively fair, but because the judges' race would, if its decisions were questioned as suspect, destroy itself. In the holiest place on their world they had erected a religious machine. It could be activated to emit a tone that would shatter their crystal carapaces. They were a race of exquisite cricket-like creatures, no larger than the thumb of a man. They were treasured throughout the civilized worlds, and their loss would have been catastrophic. Their honor and their value was never questioned. All races abided by their decisions.

So Dira's people gave over jurisdiction to that certain world, and went away, leaving Dira with only the Deathbird, a special caretakership the adjudicators had creatively woven into their judgment.

There is recorded one last meeting between Dira and those who had given him his commission. There were readings that could not be ignored —had, in fact, been urgently brought to the attention of the fathers of Dira's race by the adjudicators—and the Great Coiled One came to Dira at the

last possible moment to tell him of the mad thing into whose hands this world had been given, to tell Dira of what the mad thing could do.

The Great Coiled One—whose rings were loops of wisdom acquired through centuries of gentleness and perception and immersed meditations that had brought forth lovely designs for many worlds—he who was the holiest of Dira's race, honored Dira by coming to *him*, rather than commanding Dira to appear.

We have only one gift to leave them, he said. *Wisdom. This mad one will come, and he will lie to them, and he will tell them: created he them. And we will be gone, and there will be nothing between them and the mad one but you. Only you can give them the wisdom to defeat him in their own good time.* Then the Great Coiled One stroked the skin of Dira with ritual affection, and Dira was deeply moved and could not reply. Then he was left alone.

The mad one came, and interposed himself, and Dira gave them wisdom, and time passed. His name became other than Dira, it became Snake, and the new name was despised: but Dira could see the Great Coiled One had been correct in his readings. So Dira made his selection. A man, one of them, and gifted him with the spark.

All of this is recorded somewhere. It is history.

9

The man was not Jesus of Nazareth. He may have been Simon. Not Genghis Khan, but perhaps a foot soldier in his horde. Not Aristotle, but possibly one who sat and listened to Socrates in the agra. Neither the shambler who discovered the wheel nor the link who first ceased painting himself blue and applied the colors to the walls of the cave. But one near them, somewhere near at hand. The man was not Richard *Couer de Lion*, Rembrandt, Richelieu, Rasputin, Robert Fulton or the Mahdi. Just a man. With the spark.

10

Once, Dira came to the man. Very early on. The spark was there, but the light needed to be converted to energy. So Dira came to the man, and did what had to be done before the mad one knew of it, and when he discovered that Dira, the Snake, had made contact, he quickly made explanations.

This legend has come down to us as the fable of *Faust*.

TRUE or FALSE?

11

Light converted to energy, thus:

In the fortieth year of his five hundredth incarnation, all-unknowing of the eons of which he had been part, the man found himself wandering in a terrible dry place under a thin, flat burning disc of sun. He was a Berber tribesman who had never considered shadows save to relish them when they provided shade. The shadow came to him, sweeping down across the sands like the *khamsin* of Egypt, the *simoom* of Asia Minor, the *harmattan*, all of which he had known in his various lives, none of which he remembered. The shadow came over him like the *sirocco*.

The shadow stole the breath from his lungs and the man's eyes rolled up in his head. He fell to the ground and the shadow took him down and down, through the sands, into the Earth.

Mother Earth.

She lived, this world of trees and rivers and rocks with deep stone thoughts. She breathed, had feelings, dreamed dreams, gave birth, laughed and grew contemplative for millenia. This great creature swimming in the sea of space.

What a wonder, thought the man, for he had never understood that the Earth was his mother, before this. He had never understood, before this, that the Earth had a life of its own, at once a part of mankind and quite separate from mankind. A mother with a life of her own.

Dira, Snake, shadow. . .took the man down and let the spark of light change itself to energy as the man became one with the Earth. His flesh melted and became quiet, cool soil. His eyes glowed with the light that shines in the darkest centers of the planet and he saw the way the mother cared for her young: the worms, the roots of plants, the rivers that cascaded for miles over great cliffs in enormous caverns, the bark of trees. He was taken once more to the bosom of that great Earth mother, and understood the joy of her life.

Remember this, Dira said to the man.

What a wonder, the man thought. . .

. . .and was returned to the sands of the desert, with no rememberance of having slept with, loved, enjoyed the body of his natural mother.

12

They camped at the base of the mountain, in a greenglass cave; not deep but angled sharply so the blown pumice could not reach them. They put Nathan Stack's stone in a fault in the cave's floor, and the heat spread quickly, warming them. The shadow thing with its

triangular head sank back in shadow and closed its eye and sent its hunting instinct out for food. A shriek came back on the wind.

Much later, when Nathan Stack had eaten, when he was reasonably content and well-fed, he stared into the shadows and spoke to the creature sitting there.

"How long was I down there. . .how long was the sleep?"

The shadow thing spoke in whispers. *A quarter of a million years.*

Stack did not reply. The figure was beyond belief. The shadow creature seemed to understand.

In the life of a world no time at all.

Nathan Stack was a man who could make accomodations. He smiled quickly and said, "I must have been tired."

The shadow did not respond.

"I don't understand very much of this. It's pretty damned frightening. To die, then to wake up. . .here. Like this."

You did not die. You were taken, put down there. By the end you will understand everything, I promise you.

"Who put me down there?"

I did. I came and found you when the time was right, and I put you down there.

"Am I still Nathan Stack?"

If you wish.

"But *am* I Nathan Stack?"

You always were. You had many other names, many other bodies, but the spark was always yours. Stack seemed about to speak, and the shadow creature added, *You were always on your way to being who you are.*

"But what *am* I? Am I still Nathan Stack, dammit?"

If you wish.

"Listen: you don't seem too sure about that. You came and got me, I mean I woke up and there you were; now who should know better than you what my name is?"

You have had many names in many times. Nathan Stack is merely the one you remember. You had a very different name long ago, at the start, when I first came to you.

Stack was afraid of the answer, but he asked, "What was my name then?"

Ish-lilith. Husband of Lilith. Do you remember her?

Stack thought, tried to open himself to the past, but it was as unfathomable as the quarter of a million years through which he had slept in the crypt.

"No. But there were other women, in other times."

Many. There was one who replaced Lilith.

"I don't remember."

Her name. . .does not matter. But when the mad one took

her from you and replaced her with the other. . .then I knew it would end like this. The Deathbird.

"I don't mean to be stupid, but I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about."

Before it ends, you will understand everything.

"You said that before." Stack paused, stared at the shadow creature for a long time only moments long, then, "What was your name?"

Before I met you my name was Dira.

He said it in his native tongue. Stack could not pronounce it.

"Before you met me. What is it now?"

Snake.

Something slithered past the mouth of the cave. It did not stop, but it called out with the voice of moist mud sucking down into a quagmire.

"Why did you put *me* down there? Why did you come to me in the first place? What spark? Why can't I remember these other lives or who I was? What do you want from me?"

You should sleep. It will be a long climb. And cold.

"I slept for two hundred and fifty thousand years, I'm hardly tired," Stack said. "Why did you pick me?"

Later. Now sleep. Sleep has other uses.

Darkness deepened around Snake, seeped out around the cave, and Nathan Stack lay down near the warming-stone, and the darkness took him.

13

SUPPLEMENTARY READING

This is an essay by a writer. It is clearly an appeal to the emotions. As you read it ask yourself how it applies to the subject under discussion. What is the writer trying to say? Does he succeed in making his point? Does this essay cast light on the point of the subject under discussion? After you have read this essay, using the reverse side of your test paper, write your own essay (500 words or less) on the loss of a loved one. If you have never lost a loved one, fake it.

AHBHU

Yesterday my dog died. For eleven years Ahbhu was my closest friend. He was responsible for my writing a story about a boy and his dog that many people have read. He was not a pet, he was a person. It was impossible to anthropomorphize him, he wouldn't stand for it. But he was so much his own kind of creature, he had such a strongly formed personality, he was so determined to share his life with only those *he* chose, that it was also impossible to think of him as simply a dog. Apart from those canine characteristics into which he was

locked by his species, he comported himself like one of a kind.

We met when I came to him at the West Los Angeles Animal Shelter. I'd wanted a dog because I was lonely and I'd remembered when I was a little boy how my dog had been a friend when I had no other friends. One summer I went away to camp and when I returned I found a rotten old neighbor lady from up the street had had my dog picked up and gassed while my father was at work. I crept into the woman's back yard that night and found a rug hanging on the clothesline. The rug beater was hanging from a post. I stole it and buried it.

At the Animal Shelter there was a man in line ahead of me. He had brought in a puppy only a week or so old. A Puli, a Hungarian sheep dog; it was a sad-looking little thing. He had too many in the litter and had brought in this one to either be taken by someone else, or to be put to sleep. They took the dog inside and the man behind the counter called my turn. I told him I wanted a dog and he took me back inside to walk down the line of cages.

In one of the cages the little Puli that had just been brought in was being assaulted by three larger dogs who had been earlier tenants. He was a little thing, and he was on the bottom, getting the stuffing knocked out of him. But he was struggling mightily. The runt of the litter.

"Get him out of there!" I yelled. "I'll take him, I'll take him, get him out of there!"

He cost two dollars. It was the best two bucks I ever spent.

Driving home with him, he was lying on the other side of the front seat, staring at me. I had had a vague idea what I'd name a pet, but as I stared at him, and he stared back at me, I suddenly was put in mind of the scene in Alexander Korda's 1939 film *The Thief of Bagdad,* where the evil vizier, played by Conrad Veidt, had changed Ahbhu, the little thief, played by Sabu, into a dog. The film had superimposed the human over the canine face for a moment so there was an extraordinary look of intelligence in the face of the dog. The little Puli was looking at me with that same expression. "Ahbhu," I said.

He didn't react to the name, but then he couldn't have cared less. But that was his name, from that time on.

No one who ever came into my house was unaffected by him. When he sensed someone with good vibrations, he was right there, lying at their feet. He loved to be scratched, and despite years of admonitions he refused to stop begging for scraps at table, because he found most of the people who had come to dinner at my house were patsies unable to escape his woebegone Jackie-Coogan-as-the-Kid look.

But he was a certain barometer of bums, as well. On any number of occasions when I found someone I liked, and Ahbhu would have nothing to do with him or her, it

always turned out the person was a wrongo. I took to noting his attitude toward newcomers, and I must admit it influenced my own reactions. I was always wary of someone Ahbhu shunned.

Women with whom I had had unsatisfactory affairs would nonetheless return to the house from time to time—to visit the dog. He had an intimate circle of friends, many of whom had nothing to do with me, and numbering among their company some of the most beautiful actresses in Hollywood. One exquisite lady used to send her driver to pick him up for Sunday afternoon romps at the beach.

I never asked him what happened on those occasions. He didn't talk.

Last year he started going downhill, though I didn't realize it because he maintained the manner of a puppy almost to the end. But he began sleeping too much, and he couldn't hold down his food—not even the Hungarian meals prepared for him by the Magyars who lived up the street. And it became apparent to me something was wrong with him when he got scared during the big Los Angeles earthquake last year. Ahbhu wasn't afraid of anything. He attacked the Pacific Ocean and walked tall around vicious cats. But the quake terrified him and he jumped up in my bed and threw his forelegs around my neck. I was very nearly the only victim of the earthquake to die from animal strangulation.

He was in and out of the veterinarian's shop all through the early part of this year, and the idiot always said it was his diet.

Then one Sunday when he was out in the backyard, I found him lying at the foot of the porch stairs, covered with mud, vomiting so heavily all he could bring up was bile. He was matted with his own refuse and he was trying desperately to dig his nose into the earth for coolness. He was barely breathing. I took him to a different vet.

At first they thought it was just old age. . .that they could pull him through. But finally they took X-rays and saw the cancer had taken hold in his stomach and liver.

I put off the day as much as I could. Somehow I just couldn't conceive of a world that didn't have him in it. But yesterday I went to the vet's office and signed the euthanasia papers.

"I'd like to spend a little time with him, before," I said.

They brought him in and put him on the stainless steel examination table. He had grown so thin. He'd always had a pot-belly and it was gone. The muscles in his hind legs were weak, flaccid. He came to me and put his head into the hollow of my armpit. He was trembling violently. I lifted his head and he looked at me with that comic face I'd always thought made him look like Lawrence Talbot, the Wolf Man. He knew. Sharp as hell right up to the end, hey old friend? He knew, and he was scared. He trembled all the way down to his spiderweb legs.

This bouncing ball of hair that, when lying on a dark carpet, could be taken for a sheepskin rug, with no way to tell at which end head and which end tail. So thin. Shaking, knowing what was going to happen to him. But still a puppy.

I cried and my eyes closed as my nose swelled with the crying, and he buried his head in my arms because we hadn't done much crying at one another. I was ashamed of myself not to be taking it as well as he was.

"I *got* to, pup, because you're in pain and you can't eat. I *got* to." But he didn't want to know that.

The vet came in, then. He was a nice guy and he asked me if I wanted to go away and just let it be done.

Then Ahbhu came up out of there and *looked* at me.

There is a scene in Kazan's *Viva Zapata* where a close friend of Zapata's, Brando's, has been condemned for conspiring with the *Federales.* A friend that had been with Zapata since the mountains, since the *revolucion* had begun. And they come to the hut to take him to the firing squad, and Brando starts out, and his friend stops him with a hand on his arm, and he says to him with great friendship, "Emiliano, do it yourself."

Ahbhu looked at me and I know he was just a dog, but if he could have spoken with human tongue he could not have said more eloquently than he did with a look, *don't leave me with strangers.*

So I held him as they laid him down and the vet slipped the lanyard up around his right foreleg and drew it tight to bulge the vein, and I held his head and he turned it away from me as the needle went in. It was impossible to tell the moment he passed over from life to death. He simply laid his head on my hand, his eyes fluttered shut and he was gone.

I wrapped him in a sheet with the help of the vet, and I drove home with Ahbhu on the seat beside me, just the way we had come home eleven years before. I took him out in the backyard and began digging his grave. I dug for hours, crying and mumbling to myself, talking to him in the sheet. It was a very neat, rectangular grave with smooth sides and all the loose dirt scooped out by hand.

I laid him down in the hole and he was so tiny in there for a dog who had seemed to be so big in life, so furry, so funny. And I covered him over and when the hole was packed full of dirt I replaced the neat divot of grass I'd scalped off at the start. And that was all.

But I couldn't send him to strangers.

THE END

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. **Is there any significance to the reversal of the word *god* being *dog?* If so, what?**
2. **Does the writer try to impart human qualities to a non-human creature? Why? Discuss anthropomorphism in the light of the phrase, "Thou art God."**

3. Discuss the love the writer shows in this essay. Compare and contrast it with other forms of love: the love of a man for a woman, a mother for a child, a son for a mother, a botanist for plants, an ecologist for the Earth.

14

In his sleep, Nathan Stack talked.

"Why did you pick me? Why me. . ."

15

Like the Earth, the Mother was in pain.

The great house was very quiet. The doctor had left, and the relatives had gone into town for dinner. He sat by the side of her bed and stared down at her. She looked gray and old and crumpled; her skin was a soft ashy hue of moth-dust. He was crying softly.

He felt her hand on his knee, and looked up to see her staring at him. "You weren't supposed to catch me," he said.

"I'd be disappointed if I hadn't," she said. Her voice was very thin, very smooth.

"How is it?"

"It hurts. Ben didn't dope me too well."

He bit his lower lip. The doctor had used massive doses, but the pain was more massive. She gave little starts as tremors of sudden agony hit her. Impacts. He watched the life leaking out of her eyes.

"How is your sister taking it?"

He shrugged. "You know Charlene. She's sorry, but it's all pretty intellectual to her."

His mother let a tiny ripple of a smile move her lips. "It's a terrible thing to say, Nathan, but your sister isn't the most likeable woman in the world. I'm glad you're here." She paused, thinking, then added, "It's just possible your father and I missed something from the gene pool. Charlene isn't whole."

"Can I get you something? A drink of water?"

"No. I'm fine."

He looked at the ampoule of narcotic pain killer. The syringe lay mechanical and still on a clean towel beside it. He felt her eyes on him. She knew what he was thinking. He looked away.

"I would kill for a cigarette," she said.

He laughed. At sixty-five, both legs gone, what remained of her left side paralyzed, the cancer spreading like deadly jelly toward her heart, she was still the matriarch. "You can't have a cigarette, so forget it."

"Then why don't you use that hypo and let me out of here."

"Shut up, Mother."

"Oh, for Christ's sake, Nathan. It's hours if I'm lucky. Months if I'm not. We've had this conversation before. You know I always win."

"Did I ever tell you you were a bitchy old lady?"

"Many times, but I love you anyhow."

He got up and walked to the wall.

He could not walk through it, so he went around the inside of the room.

"You can't get away from it."

"Mother, Jesus! Please!"

"All right. Let's talk about the business."

"I could care less about the business right now."

"Then what should we talk about? The lofty uses to which an old lady can put her last moments?"

"You know, you're really ghoulish. I think you're enjoying this in some sick way."

"What other way is there to enjoy it."

"An adventure."

"The biggest. A pity your father never had the chance to savor it."

"I hardly think he'd have savored the feeling of being stamped to death in a hydraulic press."

Then he thought about it, because that little smile was on her lips again. "Okay, he probably would have. The two of you were so unreal, you'd have sat there and discussed it and analyzed the pulp."

"And you're our son."

He was, and he was. And he could not deny it, nor had he ever. He was hard and gentle and wild just like them, and he remembered the days in the jungle beyond Brasilia, and the hunt in the Cayman Trench, and the other days working in the mills alongside his father, and he knew when his moment came he would savor death as she did.

"Tell me something. I've always wanted to know. Did Dad kill Tom Golden?"

"Use the needle and I'll tell you."

"I'm a Stack. I don't bribe."

"I'm a Stack, and I know what a killing curiosity you've got. Use the needle and I'll tell you."

He walked widdershins around the room. She watched him, eyes bright as the mill vats.

"You old bitch."

"Shame, Nathan. You know you're not the son of a bitch. Which is more than your sister can say. Did I ever tell you she wasn't your father's child?"

"No, but I knew."

"You'd have liked her father. He was Swedish. Your father liked him."

"Is that why Dad broke both his arms?"

"Probably. But I never heard the Swede complain. One night in bed with me in those days was worth a couple of broken arms. Use the needle."

Finally, while the family was between the entree and the dessert, he filled the syringe and injected her. Her eyes widened as the stuff smacked her heart, and just before she died she rallied all her strength and said, "A deal's a deal. Your father didn't kill Tom Golden, I did. You're a hell of a man, Nathan, and you fought us the way we wanted, and we both loved you more than you could know. Except, dammit, you cunning s.o.b., you do know, don't you?"

"I know," he said, and she died; and he cried; and that was the extent of the poetry in it.

16

He knows we are coming.

They were climbing the northern face of the onyx mountain. Snake had coated Nathan Stack's feet with the thick glue and, though it was hardly a country walk, he was able to keep a foothold and pull himself up. Now they had paused to rest on a spiral ledge, and Snake had spoken for the first time of what waited for them where they were going.

"He?"

Snake did not answer. Stack slumped against the wall of the ledge. At the lower slopes of the mountain they had encountered slug-like creatures that had tried to attach themselves to Stack's flesh, but when Snake had driven them off they had returned to sucking the rocks. They had not come near the shadow creature. Further up, Stack could see the lights that flickered at the summit; he had felt fear that crawled up from his stomach. A short time before they had come to this ledge they had stumbled past a cave in the mountain where the bat creatures slept. They had gone mad at the presence of the man and the Snake and the sounds they had made sent waves of nausea through Stack. Snake had helped him and they had gotten past. Now they had stopped and Snake would not answer Stack's questions.

We must keep climbing.

"Because he knows we're here." There was a sarcastic rise in Stack's voice.

Snake started moving. Stack closed his eyes. Snake stopped and came back to him. Stack looked up at the one-eyed shadow.

"Not another step."

There is no reason why you should not know.

"Except, friend, I have the feeling you aren't going to tell me anything."

It is not yet time for you to know.

"Look: just because I haven't asked, doesn't mean I don't want to know. You've told me things I shouldn't be able to handle. . .all kinds of crazy things. . .I'm as old as, as. . .I don't know *how* old, but I get the feeling you've been trying to tell me I'm Adam. . ."

That is so.

". . .uh." He stopped rattling and stared back at the shadow creature. Then, very softly, accepting even more than he had thought possible, he said, "Snake." He was silent again. After a time he asked, "Give me another dream and let me know the rest of it?"

You must be patient. The one who lives at the top knows we are coming but I have been able to keep him from

perceiving your danger to him only because you do not know yourself.

"Tell me this, then: does he *want* us to come up. . .the one on the top?"

He allows it. Because he doesn't know.

Stack nodded, resigned to following Snake's lead. He got to his feet and performed an elaborate butler's motion, after you, Snake.

And Snake turned, his flat hands sticking to the wall of the ledge, and they climbed higher, spiraling upward toward the summit.

The Deathbird swooped, then rose toward the Moon. There was still time.

17

Dira came to Nathan Stack near sunset, appearing in the board room of the industrial consortium Stack had built from the family empire.

Stack sat in the pneumatic chair that dominated the conversation pit where top-level decisions were made. He was alone. The others had left hours before and the room was dim with only the barest glow of light from hidden banks that shone through the soft walls.

The shadow creature passed through the walls—and at his passage they became rose quartz, then returned to what they had been. He stood staring at Nathan Stack, and for long moments the man was unaware of any other presence in the room.

You have to go now, Snake said.

Stack looked up, his eyes widened in horror, and through his mind flitted the unmistakable image of Satan, fanged mouth smiling, horns gleaming with scintillas of light as though seen through crosstar filters, rope tail with its spade-shaped pointed tip thrashing, large cloven hoofs leaving burning imprints in the carpet, eyes as deep as pools of oil, the pitchfork, the satin-lined cape, the hairy legs of a goat, talons. He tried to scream but the sound dammed up in his throat.

No, Snake said, *that is not so. Come with me, and you will understand.*

There was a tone of sadness in the voice. As though Satan had been sorely wronged. Stack shook his head violently.

There was no time for argument. The moment had come, and Dira could not hesitate. He gestured and Nathan Stack rose from the pneumatic chair, leaving behind something that looked like Nathan Stack asleep, and he walked to Dira and Snake took him by the hand and they passed through rose quartz and went away from there.

Down and down Snake took him.

The Mother was in pain. She had been sick for eons, but it had reached the point where Snake knew it would be terminal, and the Mother knew it, too. But she would hide her child, she would intercede in her own behalf and hide him away deep in her bosom where no one, not even the mad one, could find him.

Dira took Stack to Hell.

It was a fine place.

Warm and safe and far from the probing of mad ones.

And the sickness raged on unchecked. Nations crumbled, the oceans boiled and then grew cold and filmed over with scum, the air became thick with dust and killing vapors, flesh ran like oil, the skies grew dark, the sun blurred and became dull. The Earth moaned.

The plants suffered and consumed themselves, beasts became crippled and went mad, trees burst into flame and from their ashes rose glass shapes that shattered in the wind. The Earth was dying; a long, slow, painful death.

In the center of the Earth, in the fine place, Nathan Stack slept. *Don't leave me with strangers.*

Overhead, far away against the stars, the Deathbird circled and circled, waiting for the word.

18

When they reached the highest peak, Nathan Stack looked across through the terrible burning cold and the ferocious grittiness of the demon wind and saw the sanctuary of always, the cathedral of forever, the pillar of remembrance, the haven of perfection, the pyramid of blessings, the toyshop of creation, the vault of deliverance, the monument of longing, the receptacle of thoughts, the maze of wonder, the catafalque of despair, the podium of pronouncements and the kiln of last attempts.

On a slope that rose to a star pinnacle, he saw the home of the one who dwelled here—lights flashing and flickering, lights that could be seen far off across the deserted face of the planet—and he began to suspect the name of the resident.

Suddenly everything went red for Nathan Stack. As though a filter had been dropped over his eyes, the black sky, the flickering lights, the rocks that formed the great plateau on which they stood, even Snake became red, and with the color came pain. Terrible pain that burned through every channel of Stack's body, as though his blood had been set afire. He screamed and fell to his knees,

the pain crackling through his brain, following every nerve and blood vessel and ganglia and neural track. His skull flamed.

Fight him, Snake said. *Fight him!*

I can't, screamed silently through Stack's mind, the pain too great even to speak. Fire licked and leaped and he felt the delicate tissues of thought shriveling. He tried to focus his thoughts on ice. He clutched for salavation at ice, chunks of ice, mountains of ice, swimming icebergs of ice half-buried in frozen water, even as his soul smoked and smoldered. *Ice!* He thought of millions of particles of hail rushing, falling, thundering against the firestorm eating his mind, and there was a spit of steam, a flame that went out, a corner that grew cool. . .and he took his stand in that corner, thinking ice, thinking blocks and chunks and monuments of ice, edging them out to widen the circle of coolness and safety. Then the flames began to retreat, to slide back down the channels, and he sent ice after them, snuffing them, burying them in ice and chill waters.

When he opened his eyes, he was still on his knees, but he could think again, and the red surfaces had become normal again.

He will try again. You must be ready.

"Tell me *everything!* I can't go through this without knowing, I need help!"

You can help yourself. You have the strength. I gave you the spark.

. . .and the second derangement struck!

The air turned shaverasse and he held dripping chunks of unclean rova in his jowls, the taste making him weak with nausea. His pods withered and drew up into his shell and as the bones cracked he howled with strings of pain that came so fast they were almost one. He tried to scuttle away, but his eyes magnified the shatter of light that beat against him. Facets of his eyes cracked and the juice began to bubble out. The pain was unbelievable.

Fight him!

Stack rolled onto his back, sending out cilia to touch the earth, and for an instant he realized he was seeing through the eyes of another creature, another form of life he could not even describe. But he was under an open sky and that produced fear, he was surrounded by air that had become deadly and *that* produced fear, he was going blind and *that* produced fear, he was. . .he was a *man*. . .he fought back against the feeling of being some other thing. . .he was a *man* and he would not feel fear, he would stand.

He rolled over, withdrew his cilia, and struggled to lower his pods. Broken bones grated and pain thundered through his body. He forced himself to ignore it, and finally the pods were down and he was breathing and he felt his head reeling. . .

And when he opened his eyes he was Nathan Stack again.

. . .and the third derangement struck:

Hopelessness.

Out of unending misery he came back to be Stack.

. . .and the fourth derangement struck:

Madness.

Out of raging lunacy he fought his way to be Stack.

. . .and the fifth derangement, and the sixth, and the seventh, and the plagues, and the whirlwinds, and the pools of evil, and the reduction in size and accompanying fall forever through sub-microscopic hells, and the things that fed on him from inside, and the twentieth, and the fortieth, and the sound of his voice screaming for release, and the voice of Snake always beside him, whispering *Fight him!*

Finally it stopped.

Quickly, now.

Snake took Stack by the hand and half-dragging him they raced to the great palace of light and glass on the slope,shining brightly under the star pinnacle, and they passed under an arch of shining metal into the ascension hall. The portal sealed behind them.

There were tremors in the walls. The inlaid floors of jewels began to rumble and tremble. Bits of high and faraway ceilings began to drop. Quaking, the palace gave one hideous shudder and collapsed around them.

Now, Snake said. *Now you will know everything!*

And everthing forgot to fall. Frozen in mid-air, the wreckage of the palace hung suspended above them. Even the air ceased to swirl. Time stood still. The movement of the Earth was halted. Everything held utterly immobile as Nathan Stack was permitted to understand all.

19

MULTIPLE CHOICE (Counts for ½ your final grade.)

1. God is:

A. An invisible spirit with a long beard.
B. A small dog dead in a hole.
C. Everyman.
D. The Wizard of Oz.

2. Nietzsche wrote "God is dead." By this did he mean:

A. Life is pointless.
B. Belief in supreme deities has waned.
C. There never was a God to begin with.
D. Thou art God.

3. Ecology is another name for:

A. Mother love.
B. Enlightened self-interest.
C. A good health salad with Granola.
D. God.

4. Which of these phrases most typifies the profoundest love:

A. Don't leave me with strangers.
B. I love you.
C. God is love.
D. Use the needle.

5. Which of these powers do we usually associate with God:

A. Power.
B. Love.
C. Humanity.
D. Docility.

20

None of the above.

Starlight shone in the eyes of the Deathbird and its passage through the night cast a shadow on the Moon.

21

Nathan Stack raised his hands and around them the air was still as the palace fell crashing. They were untouched. *Now you know all there is to know,* Snake said, sinking to one knee as though worshipping. There was no one there to worship but Nathan Stack.

"Was he always mad?"

From the first.

"Then those who gave our world to him were mad, and your race was mad to allow it."

Snake had no answer.

"Perhaps it was supposed to be like this," Stack said.

He reached down and lifted Snake to his feet, and he touched the shadow creature's head. "Friend," he said.

Snake's race was incapable of tears. He said, *I have waited longer than you can know for that word.*

"I'm sorry it comes at the end."

Perhaps it was supposed to be like this.

Then there was a swirling of air, a scintillance in the ruined palace, and the owner of the mountain, the owner of the ruined Earth came to them in a burning bush.

AGAIN, SNAKE? AGAIN YOU ANNOY ME?

The time for toys is ended.

NATHAN STACK YOU BRING TO STOP ME? *I* SAY WHEN THE TIME IS ENDED. *I* SAY, AS I'VE ALWAYS SAID.

Then, to Nathan Stack:

GO AWAY. FIND A PLACE TO HIDE UNTIL I COME FOR YOU.

Stack ignored the burning bush. He waved his hand and the cone of safety in which they stood vanished. "Let's find him, first, then I know what to do."

The Deathbird sharpened its talons on the night wind and sailed down through emptiness toward the cinder of the Earth.

22

Nathan Stack had once contracted pneumonia. He had lain on the operating table as the surgeon made the small incision in the chest wall. Had he not been stubborn, had he not continued working around the clock while the pneumonic infection developed into empyema, he would never have had to go under the knife, even for an operation as safe as a thoractomy. But he was a Stack, and so he lay on the operating table as the rubber tube was inserted into the chest cavity to drain off the pus in the pleural cavity, and heard someone speak his name.

NATHAN STACK.

He heard it, from far off, across an Arctic vastness; heard if echoing over and over, down an endless corridor; as the knife sliced.

NATHAN STACK.

He remembered Lilith, with hair the color of dark wine. He remembered taking hours to die beneath a rock slide as his hunting companions in the pack ripped apart the remains of the bear and ignored his grunted moans for help. He remembered the impact of the crossbow bolt as it ripped through his hauberk and split his chest and he died at Agincourt. He remembered the icy water of the Ohio as it closed over his head and the flatboat disappearing without his mates noticing his loss. He remembered the mustard gas that ate his lungs and trying to crawl toward a farmhouse near Verdun. He remembered looking directly into the flash of the bomb and feeling the flesh of his face melt away. He remembered Snake coming to him in the board room and husking him like corn from his body. He remembered sleeping in the molten core of the Earth for a quarter of a million years.

Across the dead centuries he heard his mother pleading with him to set her free, to end her pain. *Use the needle.* Her voice mingled with the voice of the Earth crying out in endless pain at her flesh that had been ripped away, at her rivers turned to arteries of dust, at her rolling hills and green fields slagged to greenglass and ashes. The voices of his mother and the mother that was Earth became one, and mingled to become Snake's voice telling him he was the one man in the world—the last man in the world—who could end the terminal case the Earth had become.

Use the needle. Put the

suffering Earth out of its misery. *It belongs to you now.*

Nathan Stack was secure in the power he contained. A power that far outstripped that of gods or Snakes or mad creators who stuck pins in their creations, who broke their toys.

YOU CAN'T. I WON'T LET YOU.

Nathan Stack walked around the burning bush crackling impotently in rage. He looked at it almost pityingly, remembering the Wizard of Oz with his great and ominous disembodied head floating in mist and lightning, and the poor little man behind the curtain turning the dials to create the effects. Stack walked around the effect, knowing he had more power than this sad, poor thing that had held his race in thrall since before Lilith had been taken from him.

He went in search of the mad one who capitalized his name.

23

Zarathustra descended alone from the mountains, encountering no one. But when he came into the forest, all at once there stood before him an old man who had left his holy cottage to look for roots in the woods. And thus spoke the old man to Zarathustra.

"No stranger to me is this wanderer: many years ago he passed this way. Zarathustra he was called, but he has changed. At that time you carried your ashes to the mountains; would you now carry your fire into the valleys? Do you not fear to be punished as an arsonist?

"Zarathustra has changed, Zarathustra has become a child, Zarathustra is an awakened one; what do you now want among the sleepers? You lived in your solitude as in the sea, and the sea carried you. Alas, would you now climb ashore? Alas, would you again drag your own body?"

Zarathustra answered: "I love man."

"Why," asked the saint, "did I go into the forest and the desert? Was it not because I loved man all-too-much? Now I love God; man I love not. Man is for me too imperfect a thing. Love of man would kill me."

"And what is the saint doing in the forest?" asked Zarathustra.

The saint answered: "I make songs and sing them; and when I make songs, I laugh, cry, and hum: thus I praise God. With singing, crying, laughing, and humming, I praise the god who is my god. But what do you bring us as a gift?"

When Zarathustra had heard these words he bade the saint farewell and said: "What could I have to give you? But let me

go quickly lest I take something from you!" And thus they separated, the old one and the man, laughing as two boys laugh.

But when Zarathustra was alone he spoke thus to his heart: "Could it be possible? This old saint in the forest had not yet heard anything of this, that *God is dead!*"

24

Stack found the mad one wandering in the forest of final moments. He was an old, tired man, and Stack knew with a wave of his hand he could end it for this god in a moment. But what was the reason for it? It was even too late for revenge. It had been too late from the start. So he let the old one go his way, wandering in the forest mumbling to himself, I WON'T LET YOU DO IT, in the voice of a cranky child; mumbling pathetically, OH, PLEASE, I DON'T WANT TO GO TO BED YET. I'M NOT YET DONE PLAYING.

And Stack came back to Snake, who had served his function and protected Stack until Stack had learned that he was more powerful than the God he'd worshipped all through the history of men. He came back to Snake and their hands touched and the bond of friendship was sealed at last, at the end.

Then they worked together and Nathan Stack used the needle with a wave of his hands, and the Earth could not sigh with relief as its endless pain was ended. . .but it did sigh, and it settled in upon itself, and the molten core went out, and the winds died, and from high above them Stack heard the fulfillment of Snake's final act; he heard the descent of the Deathbird.

"What was your name?" Stack asked his friend.

Dira.

And the Deathbird settled down across the tired shape of the Earth, and it spread its wings wide, and brought them over and down, and enfolded the Earth as a mother enfolds her weary child. Dira settled down on the amethyst floor of the dark-shrouded palace, and closed his single eye with gratitude. To sleep at last, at the end.

All this, as Nathan Stack stood watching. He was the last, at the end, and because he had come to own—if even for a few moments—that which could have been his from the start, had he but known, he did not sleep but stood and watched. Knowing at last, at the end, that he had loved and done no wrong.

25

The Deathbird closed its wings over the Earth until at last, at the end, there was only the great bird crouched over the dead cinder. Then the Deathbird raised its head to the star-filled sky and repeated the sigh of loss the Earth had felt at the end. Then its eyes closed, it tucked its head carefully under its wing, and all was night.

Far away, the stars waited for the cry of the Deathbird to reach them so final moments could be observed at last, at the end, for the race of men.

26

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