

WHITE CREATURES

Gregory Benford

And after let me lie
On the breast of the darkening sky.

—JOAN ABBE

The aliens strap him in. He cannot feel the bindings but he knows they must be there; he cannot move. Or perhaps it is the drug. They must have given him something because his world is blurred, spongy. The white creatures are flowing shapes in watery light. He feels numb. The white creatures are moving about him, making high chattering noises. He tries to fix on them but they are vague formless shapes moving in and out of focus. They are cloudy, moving too fast to see, but he knows they are working on him. Something nudges his leg. For a moment something clicks at his side. Two white creatures make a dull drone and fade into the distance. All sensations are formless and cloudy; the air puckers with moisture. He tries to move but his body is lethargic, painless, suspended. There is gravity; above, a pale glow illuminates the room. Yes, he is in a room. They have not brought him to their ship; they are using human buildings. He cannot remember being captured. How many people do they have? When he tries to focus on the memory it dissolves and slips away. He knows they are experimenting on him, probing for something. He tries to recall what happened but there are only scraps of memory and unconnected bunches of facts. He closes his eyes. Shutting out the murky light seems to clear his mind. Whatever they have given him still affects his body, but with concentration the vagueness slips away. He is elated. Clarity returns; thoughts slide effortlessly into place. The textures of his inner mind are deep and strong.

Muddy sounds recede. If he can ignore the white creatures things become sharp again. He knows he must get free of the white creatures and he can only do that if he can understand what is happening. He is absolutely alone and he must fight them. He must remember. He tries. The memories resolve slowly with a weight of their own. He tries.

He cut across the body of the wave, awash in churning foam. The clear Atlantic was startlingly cold. The waves were too small for boards but Merrick was able to body-surf on them easily. The

momentum carried him almost to shore. He waded through the rippling currents and began jogging down the beach. After a moment his wind came to him and he ran faster. His long stride devoured the yards. He churned doggedly past forests of firm bodies; the beach was littered with Puerto Ricans. The tropical sun shimmered through a thin haze of sweat that trickled into his eyes. As his arms and legs grew leaden he diverted himself with glimpses of the figures and faces sliding by, moving stride by stride into his past. His mind wandered. Small families, leathery men, dogs and children—he made them all act out plays in his head, made them populate his preconceived universe. That was where he saw Erika Bascomb for the second time. He had met her at a reception some months before, known her only as the a distant smiling wife of the Cyclops director. She sat on the sand, arms braced behind, and followed his progress. Her deliciously red lips parted in a smile more than mere welcoming and he slowed, stopped. His thickening waistline showed his age, thirty-eight, but his legs were as good as ever; strong, tanned, no stringy muscles or fine webbed nets of blue veins. Erika was a few years younger, heavily tanned from too much leisure time. So he stopped. He remembered that day better than any of the others. She was the first fresh element in his life for years, an antidote to the tedious hours of listening that filled his nights with Cyclops. He remembered her brown nipples pouting and the image dissolved into the green and brown swath of jungle that ringed the Cyclops project. The directional radio telescopes were each enormous, but ranked together in rigid lanes they added up to something somehow less massive. Each individual dish tipped soundlessly to cup an ear at the sky. The universe whispered, exciting a tremor of electrons in the metal lattice. He spent his days and nights trying to decipher those murmurs from eternity. Pens traced out the signals on graph paper and it was his lot to scan them for signs of order and intelligence. Bascomb was a pudgy radio astronomer intent on his work who tried to analyze each night's returns. Erika worked there as a linguist, a decoder for a message which never came. Merrick was merely a technician, a

tracer of circuits. Project Cyclops had begun in earnest only the year before and he had landed a job with it after a decade of routine at NASA. When he came they were just beginning to search within a two-degree cone about the galactic center, looking for permanent beacons. If the galactic superculture was based in the hub, this was the most probable search technique. That was the Lederberg hypothesis, and as director Bascomb adopted it, supported it; and when it failed his stock in the project dropped somewhat. One saw him in the corridors late at night, gray slacks hanging from a protruding belly, the perpetual white shirt with its crescent of sweat at the armpits. Bascomb worked late, neglected his wife, and Erika drifted into Merrick's orbit. He remembered one night when they met at the very edge of the bowl valley and coupled smoothly beneath the giant webbing of the phased array. Bascomb was altering the bandwidth of the array, toying with the frequencies between the hydroxyl line and the 21-centimeter hydrogen resonance. Merrick lay in the lush tropical grass with Erika and imagined he could hear the faint buzzing of hydrogen noise as it trickled from the sky into the Cyclops net, bearing random messages of the inert universe. Bascomb and his bandwidth, blind to the chemical surges of the body. Bascomb resisting the urgings of Drake, Bascomb checking only the conventional targets of Tau Ceti, Epsilon Eridani, the F and G and K stars within thirty light-years. Politics, a wilderness of competition and ideals and guesses. He tried to tell Erika of this but she knew it already, knew the facts anyway, and had tired of them. A linguist with nothing to translate. She waited for a mutter from the sky, but waiting dulled the mind and sharpened the senses. She shook her head when he spoke of it, fingers pale and white where she gripped the grass with compressed energy, head lowered as he took her from behind. Blond strands hung free in the damp jungle twilight. Her eyelids flickered as his rhythm swelled up in her; she groaned with each stroke. The galaxy turned, a white swarm of bees.

The aliens seize him. He struggles against the padded ghostlike webbing. He moves his head a millimeter to see them but he cannot focus, cannot bring things to a point. The white creatures are patches of light. They make chittering shrieks to each other and move about him. Their images ripple and splinter; light cannot converge. They are performing experiments on humans. He tilts his head and sees a plastic tube snaking in from infinity. There is a fetid smell. The tube enters his nostril and penetrates his sinuses. Something flows into him or out of him—there seems little difference—and his perceptions shift and alter again. The white creatures make a nugget of pain within him. He tries to twist away but his body is full of strange weaknesses, limbs slack. His face crinkles with pain. He feels delicate tremors, minute examinations at points along his legs and belly. He is an animal on the dissecting table and the white creatures are high above him, taller than men. Their rapid, insect-like gestures melt into the murky liquid light. They are cutting him open; he feels the sharp slitting in his calf. He opens his mouth to scream but nothing comes out. They will break him into parts; they will turn him inside out and spill his brains into a cup. His fluids will trickle onto cracked linoleum, be absorbed into the parched eternal earth. Do they know that he is male? Is this what they want to find out? Siphon away hormones, measure blood count, trace the twisted DNA helix, find the sense of rotation in body sugar? What are they after? What could they use? He shuts them out, disconnects from the dense flooded universe outside his eyelids. He thinks.

Erika continued to meet him. There were sly deceptions, shopping expeditions in the town, Erika in a Peter Pan collar and cable-stitch cardigan; tan, arranged, intent, as much a monument to an America now vanished as a statue of Lincoln. Neat, making casual purchases, then into the back hotel room and coiled about him in sweaty ecstasy. She whispered things to him. That Bascomb was pale and soft underneath his clothes, a belly of suet, mind

preoccupied with problems of planning, signal-to-noise ratios, search strategies. Listening to her secrets, Merrick thought uneasily that he was not that different from Bascomb, he believed the same things, but his body was hard and younger than the other man's. Erika had gradually drifted into the public relations office of Cyclops; as a linguist she had nothing to do. She escorted the oil-rich Arabs around the bowl-shaped valley, flattered the philanthropists who supported the project, wrote the press releases. She was good, she was clever, she made connections. And one day when Bascomb appeared suddenly in the hotel room, entering into the holy place of sighs and groans unannounced, she was ready. Merrick did not know what to do, saw himself in a comic role of fleeing adulterer, out the window with half his clothes and into the streets, running. But there was none of that. They were all very civilized. Erika said little, simply put on her clothes and left with Bascomb. The silence was unnerving. Merrick did not see her for two weeks and Bascomb never came into Merrick's part of the technical shop. A while later the rumor spread that Erika had left Bascomb, and before he could check it she was gone. She went to South America, they said, and he wondered why. But he knew quite well why he got the less desirable shifts now, why he was passed over for promotion, why he was transferred to the least likable foreman in the project. He knew.

The white creatures are gone for a while. Perhaps it is night. He lies with prickly points radiating in his body where they had cut him. He feels pierced and immobile, a butterfly pinned to a board. Blurred globs of cloudy sensation wash over him. Occasionally an alien passes through the murky light in the distance. The pale glow from the ceiling seems yellow. He wonders if he can deduce anything from this. He must try to gather scraps of information. Only through knowledge can he discover their weaknesses. Yellow light. A G-type star? The sun is a G-type and appears white in space. What would it look like beneath an atmosphere somewhat

different from Earth's? It is impossible to say; there are so many kinds of stars: O and B and A and F and G and K and M. The O's are fierce and young, the M's red, aged, wise. O Be A Fine Girl, Kiss Me. He remembers Drake arguing that the search strategy should not include M types because the volume around them supporting a terrestrial-type planet would be so small. They would be locked by tides to their primary, said Dole. Merrick cannot follow the argument.

He left Puerto Rico after two years of gradual pressure from Bascomb. Erika severed her n-year marriage contract with Bascomb from Chile. Merrick was in Washington, D.C., doing routine work for NASA again, when he received her first letter. She had become a guide for the wealthy rising capitalists of Brazil, Chile, Argentina. She showed them the North American continent, carefully shepherding them around the polluted areas and the sprawling urban tangle. There was a market for that sort of talent; the insulation between social classes was breaking down in America. Erika could shuttle her group of rising capitalists from hotel to sea resort to imitation ranch, all the while preserving their serenity by taking care of all dealings with the natives. Her customers invariably spoke no English. She passed through Washington every few months and they began their affair again. He had other women, of course, but with Erika new doors of perception opened. Her steamy twists and slides never failed to wrap him in a timeless cloak. The dendrites demanded, the synapses chorused, ganglia murmured and the ligaments summoned; they danced the great dance. She forced him to cling to his youth. Between their rendings in the bedroom she would pace the floor energetically, generating piles of cigarette butts and speaking of everything, anything, nothing. He did not know if he ever really learned anything from her but that furious drive onward. She was no longer a girl: the slight slackening of age, the first bluntings of a world once sharp-edged, had begun. She could not

deal with it. He saw the same beginnings in himself but ignored them, passed them over. Erika could not accept. The thought of juices souring within her made her pace furiously, smoke more, eat with a fierce energy. She knew what was coming. She saw. She had forgotten Alpha Centauri, Tau Ceti, the aching drifting silences.

The white creatures move in the watery light. He wonders suddenly if they swim in a liquid. He is in a bubble, moored to the bottom of a pool of ammonia, a plastic interface through which they study him. It explains much. But no, one brushes against his bed in passing and Merrick feels the reassuring vibration. They can breathe our atmosphere. They come from some place quite similar, perhaps guided by our UHF or VHF transmissions. He thinks this through. The North Canadian Defense Network is gone, victim of international treaties. There is cable television, satellite relay. Earth no longer emits great bursts of power in those frequency bands. It has ceased to be a noisy signal in the universe. How did the white creatures find Earth? Why did Cyclops find nothing? We are not alone, the white creatures found us, but are all the other civilizations simply listening, can no one afford beacons? The white creatures do not say. Except for them is it a dead wheeling galaxy of blind matter? He cannot believe that.

He transferred to California in his late forties. There were still Mariners and Vikings, gravity-assisted flights to the outer planets, Mars burrowers and balloons for the clouds of Venus, sun skimmers and Earth measurers. He wanted that sort of work. It seemed to him as the years went on that it was the only thing worth doing. Cyclops was sputtering along, torn by factionalism and the eternal silence at twenty-one centimeters. He went to Los Angeles to do the work even though he hated the city; it was full of happy homogeneous people without structure or direction. While on the bus to work, it seemed to him Los Angeles went on long after it

had already made its point. There were women there and people worth talking to, but nothing that drew him out of himself. Instead he concentrated on circuits and design work. Mazes of cold electrical logic had to be planted in delicate substrates. There were details of organization, of scheduling procedures, of signal strength and redundancy probability. To Erika all this was the same; she had lost interest in these matters when she left Bascomb. Her business was thriving, however, and she had picked up a good series of contacts with China's subtle protectors of the people. These gentlemen were the new international rich who vacationed in the New World because the currency differential was favorable and, of course, increasing such contacts was good for the advancement of the ideas of Marx and Lenin and Mao. They came to see Disneyland, the beaches, the few tattered remnants of California history. But they remained in their hotels at night (even Los Angeles had muggers by then) and Erika could come to him whenever she chose. She was drinking more than and smoking one pack of cigarettes after another, choking the ash-

Table 2. Comparison of Forecasts, 1964 and 1977 Developments

1964 statement	1977 statement	1964 media n	1977 median	correlation
Availability of a machine which comprehends standard IQ tests and scores above 150	Same; comprehend is understood as ability to respond to questions in English, accompanied by diagrams	1990	1992	About the same; larger deviation from media in 1977

Permanent base established on the moon (ten men, indefinite stay)	Same	1982	1992	Later, a less optimistic forecast
Economic feasibility of commercial manufacture of many chemical elements from subatomic building blocks	Same	2100	2012	Earlier, a more optimistic forecast
Two-way communication with extraterrestrials	Discovery of information that proves the existence of intelligent beings beyond Earth (note change of wording; bias for earlier forecast)	2075	2025	Earlier, as expected
Commercial global ballistic transport (including boost-glide techniques)	Same	2000	2030	Later, though less deviation from media in 1977

tray. The lines were lengthening around her eyes and on her forehead. Despite tanning and exercise and careful diet, age was catching her and in her business that was nearly fatal. She depended on her charm, gaiety, lightness; the South Americans and Chinese liked young Americans, blond Americans. Erika was still witty and shrewd, sometimes warm, but her long legs, thin wrists, tight and sleek tanned skin were losing their allure. So she came to him frequently for solace and did not notice that he aged as well. She came to him again and again, whenever possible. He opened her. She stretched thin in the quilted shadows of his apartment, a

layer one molecule thick that wrapped him in a river of musk. They made a thick animal pant fill the room until the sound became larger than they could control; they left it and went back to speaking with smoke fingers. He knew what to say. Erika moved under him. Above him. Through him. Some natural balance was lost in her, some sure-ness. He saw for a moment what it was and then she groaned and no longer did he know what he was about. O Be A Fine Girl, Open To Me.

They come to him in watery silence and slice him again. The smokelike strands keep him from struggling and needlepoints sting, cut, penetrate to marrow. These are no coded cries across hydrogen. These are real. The white creatures dart in and out of the mosaic around him. He looks beyond them and suddenly sees a cart go by with a body upon it. A human is trussed and bound, dead. The white creatures ignore the sight. They work upon him.

She began to lose patronage. The telephone rang less often and she made fewer trips to California. She began smoking more and picked at her food, afraid to ingest too many carbohydrates or fats that lengthen the lines and make the tissues sag. You have always lived in the future, she said. You love it, don't you. That's why you were at Cyclops and that's why you are with NASA. Yes, he said. Then what do you think of it now, she said. What do you think of your future? He shrugged. What do you think of mine, then? he said. A long slide down the back slope of the hill. It's harder for a woman, you know. I haven't got anyone. Bascomb is dead, you know. She snuffed out a cigarette. The failure of the project killed him, Merrick said. Erika studied the back of her hand. Her lips moved and she traced the fine webbing of lines with a fingernail. It's all downhill, she said absently. And then, abruptly: But not me. I'm not going to let it happen to me. He gave her a wry smile and lifted an eyebrow. She had drunk a lot of red wine and he

attributed everything she said to that. No, I really mean it. She looked at him earnestly. I have some money now. I can do it now. What? he asked. The long sleep. He was shocked. He fumbled with his apartment keys and they made a hollow clanking sound in the sudden silence. You won't do that, he said. Of course I will. Her eyes blazed and she was suddenly filled with fire. Things will be different in the future, she said. We can't even get organ replacements without special approval now. I'm sure that will be different in a few decades and I know there will be some way to retard aging by that time. He frowned doubtfully. No, she went on, I'm sure of it. I'm going to have myself frozen. I would rather take the chance on that than live out my life the way it must be from now on. Merrick did not know how to deal with her. He took her home and saw her again the next day but she was an Erika changed now. In the long dry California night she sat astride him and rocked and wriggled her way to her own destination. Her breasts loomed over him like gravestones. Even when he was within the sacred pocket of her she was an island bound for the frozen wastes. He did not let her see him cry.

Stephen Dole. Parameters for quasi-terrestrial planets.

—surface gravity between 0.68 G and 1.5 G.

—mean annual temperature of 10% of planetary surface between 0 and 30 degrees C. Seasonal variance not to exceed ± 10 degrees C.

—atmospheric pressure between 0.15 and 3.4 Earth sea level. Partial pressure of oxygen between 107 and 400 Torr.

—surface between 20% and 90% covered with water.

—rainfall between 10 and 80 inches annually.

—dust levels not to exceed 50 million particles per cubic foot. Winds and storms infrequent. Low seismic activity.

- ionizing radiation must not exceed 0.02 Rem per week.
- meteor infall rate comparable to Earth normal.
- oxygen-producing life forms or suitable ammonia or methane-based biochemistry.
- star on main sequence between types F2 and K1.
- no nearby gas giant planets. Planet must not be tidelocked to primary star.
- stable orbits within the ecosphere.
- for habitation by men, eccentricity of planetary orbit must not exceed 0.2. Period of rotation between 2 and 96 hours. Axial tilt must be less than 80%.

Throughout the next year he tried to reason with her. There was so little hope of being revived. True, they were successfully bringing back people from nitrogen temperatures, 77 degrees Kelvin, but the cost was enormous. Even if she put her name on the public waiting list it could be decades before she was called, if ever. So she carefully took out the papers and documents and showed him the bank accounts in Mexico City, Panama, Melbourne, San Francisco. She had concealed it from him all the years, her steadily amassing assets that never showed in her style of living or her choice of friends. He began to realize that she was a marvelously controlled woman. She had leached an Argentine businessman of hundreds of thousands while she was his mistress. She had made sound speculations in the land markets of rural Brazil. She withdrew from the stock market just before the catastrophe of '93. It seemed incredible but there it was. She had the money to insure that she would be revived when something fundamental had been achieved in retarding aging. He realized he did not truly know her, yet he wanted to. There was a long silence between them and then she said, you know this feeling? She threw

her head back. Her blond hair swirled like a warm, dry fluid in the air. Yes, sure, Merrick said. She looked at him intensely. I've just begun to realize that isn't what you're about, she said. You're married to something else. But that instant of feeling and being alive is worth all your ideals and philosophies.

He mixed himself a drink. He saw he did not know her.

The white creatures come again. He is so small, compared to his scream.

He went with her to the Center. There were formalities and forms to be signed, but they evaporated too soon and the attendant led her away. He waited in a small cold room until she reappeared wearing a paper smock. Erika smiled uncertainly. Without makeup she was somehow younger but he knew it would be useless to say so. The attendants left them alone and they talked for a while about inconsequential things, recalling Puerto Rico and Washington and California. He realized they were talking about his life instead of hers. Hers would go on. She had some other port of call beyond his horizon and she was already mentally going there, had already left him behind. After an hour their conversation dribbled away. She gave him a curiously virginal kiss and the attendants returned when she signaled. She passed through the beaded curtain. He heard their footsteps fade away. He tried to imagine where she was going, the infinite cold nitrogen bath in which she would swim. She drifted lazily, her hair swirling. He saw only her gravestone breasts.

Merrick worked into the small hours of the morning at the Image Processing Laboratory. The video monitor was returning data from the Viking craft which had landed on the surface of Titan the day before. Atmospheric pressure was 0.43 Earth sea level. The chemical processors reported methane, hydrogen, some

traces of ammonia vapor. The astrophysicists were watching the telemetered returns from the onboard chemical laboratory and Merrick was alone as he watched the computer contrast-enhancement techniques fill in line by line the first photographic returns. Through his headphones he heard the bulletins about the chemical returns. There was some evidence of amino acids and long-chain polymers. The chemists thought there were signs of lipids and the few reporters present scurried over to that department to discuss the news. So it was that Merrick became the first man to see the face of Titan. The hills were rocky, with dark grainy dust embedded in ammonia ice. A low methane cloud clung to the narrow valley. Pools of methane lay scattered among boulders; the testing tendrils of the Viking were laced through several of the ponds. There was life. Scattered, rudimentary, but life. With aching slowness, some simple process of reproduction went on in the shallow pools at 167 degrees Kelvin. Merrick watched the screen for a long time before he went on with the technician's dry duties. It was the high point of his life. He had seen the face of the totally alien.

Some years later, seeking something, he visited the Krishna temple. There was a large room packed with saffron-robed figures being lectured on doctrine. Merrick could not quite tell them what he wanted. They nodded reassuringly and tried to draw him out but the words would not come. Finally they led him through a beaded curtain to the outside. They entered a small garden through a bamboo gate, noisily slipping the wooden latch. A small man sat in lotus position on a broad swath of green. As Merrick stood before him, the walnut-brown man studied him with quick, assessing yellow eyes. He gestured for Merrick to sit. They exchanged pleasantries. Merrick explained his feelings, his rational skepticism about religion in any form. He was a scientist. But perhaps there was more to these matters than met the eye, he said hopefully. The teacher picked up a leaf, smiling, and asked why anyone should

spend his life studying the makeup of this leaf. What could be gained from it? Any form of knowledge has a chance of resonating with other kinds, Merrick replied. So? the man countered. Suppose the universe is a parable, Merrick said haltingly. By studying part of it, or finding other intelligences in it and discovering their viewpoints, perhaps we could learn something of the design that was intended. Surely the laws of science, the origin of life, were no accident. The teacher pondered for a moment. No, he said, they are not accidents. There may be other creatures in this universe, too. But these laws, these beings, they are not important. The physical laws are the bars of a cage. The central point is not to study the bars, but to get out of the cage. Merrick could not follow this. It seemed to him that the act of discovering things, of reaching out, was everything. There was something immortal about it. The small man blinked and said, it is nothing. This world is an insane asylum for souls. Only the flawed remain here. Merrick began to talk about his work with NASA and Erika. The small man waved away these points and shook his head. No, he said. It is nothing.

On the way to the hospital he met a woman in the street. He glanced at her vaguely and then a chill shock ran through him, banishing all thoughts of the cancer within. She was Erika. No, she only looked like Erika. She could not be Erika, that was impossible. She was bundled up in a blue coat and she hurried through the crisp San Francisco afternoon. A half block away he could see she did not have the same facial lines, the same walk, the bearing of Erika. He felt an excitement nonetheless. The turbulence was totally intellectual, he realized. The familiar vague tension in him was gone, had faded without his noticing the loss. He felt no welling pressure. As she approached he thought perhaps she would look at him speculatively but her glance passed through him without seeing. He knew that it had been some time now since the random skitting images of women had crossed his mind involuntarily. No fleshy feast of thighs, hips, curving waists, no

electric flicker of eyelashes that ignited broiling warmth in his loins. He had not had a woman in years.

The hospital was only two blocks farther but he could not wait. Merrick found a public restroom and went in. He stood at the urinal feeling the faint tickling release and noticed that the word BOOK was gouged in square capitals in the wall before him. He leaned over and studied it. After a moment he noticed that this word had been laid over another. The F had been extended and closed to make a B, the U and C closed to O's, the K left as it was. He absorbed the fact, totally new to him, that every FUCK could be made into a BOOK. Who had done the carving? Was the whole transition a metaphysical joust? The entire episode, now fossilized, seemed fraught with interpretation. Distracted, he felt a warm trickle of urine running down his fingers. He fumbled at his pants and shuffled over to the wash basin. There was no soap but he ran water over his wrinkled fingers and shook them dry in the chill air. There was a faint sour tang of urine trapped in the room, mingling with the ammonia odor of disinfectant. Ammonia. Methane. Titan. His attention drifted away for a moment and suddenly he remembered Erika. That was her in the street, he was sure of it. He looked around, found the exit and slowly made his way up the steps to the sidewalk. He looked down the street but there was no sign of her. A car passed; she was not in it. He turned one way, then the other. He could not make up his mind. He had been going that way, toward the hospital. Carrying the dark heavy thing inside him, going to the hospital. That way. But this—he looked in the other direction. Erika had walked this way and was moving rather quickly. She could easily be out of sight by now. He turned again and his foot caught on something. He felt himself falling. There was a slow gliding feel to it as though the falling took forever and he gave himself over to the sensation without thought of correcting it. He was falling. It felt so good.

The aliens are upon him. They crowd around, gibbering.

Blurred gestures in the liquid light. They crowd closer; he raises his arm to ward them off and in the act his vision clears. The damp air parts and he sees. His arm is a spindly thread of bone, the forearm showing strings of muscle under the skin. He does not understand. He moves his head. The upper arm is a sagging bag of fat, and white. The sliding marbled slabs of flesh tremble as he strains to hold up his arm. Small black hairs sprout from the gray skin. He tries to scream. Cords stand out on his neck but he can make no sound. The white creatures are drifting ghosts of white in the distance. Something has happened to him. He blinks and watches an alien seize his arm. The image ripples and he sees it is a woman, a nurse. He moves his arm weakly. O Be A Fine Girl, Help Me. The blur falls away and he sees the white creatures are men. They are men. Words slide by him; he cannot understand. His tongue is thick and heavy and damp. He twists his head. A latticework of glass tubes stands next to his bed. He sees his reflection in a stainless-steel instrument case: hollow pits of his eyes, slack jaw, wrinkled skin shiny with sweat. They speak to him. They want him to do something. They are running clean and cool. They want him to do something, to write something, to sign a form. He opens his mouth to ask why and his tongue runs over the smooth blunted edge of his gums. They have taken away his teeth, his bridge. He listens to their slurred words. Sign something. A release form, he was found in the street on his way to check in. The operation is tomorrow—a search, merely a search, exploratory... he wrenches away from them. He does not believe them. They are white creatures. Aliens from the great drifting silences between the stars. Cyclops. Titan. He has spent his life on the aliens and they are not here. They have come to nothing. They are speaking again but he does not want to listen. If it were possible to close his ears—

But why do they say I am old? I am still here. I am thinking, feeling. It cannot be like this. I am, I am... Why do they say I am old?

Alabama-born GREGORY BENFORD is a theoretical physicist who took his doctorate at the University of California at San Diego; for the past few years he has been Associate Professor of Physics at that university's Irvine campus, where he does research in controlled thermonuclear fusion. His science-fiction stories have been appearing professionally since 1965; they include two novels, Deeper Than the Darkness (1970) and The Jupiter Project (1972), the novella "Threads of Time" (1974), and several dozen shorter works. Though his fiction has always been marked by strong emphasis on scientific extrapolation, he has in recent years also become concerned with contemporary modes of literary expression.