

THE GATE

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Fiction from:-
Storm Constantine
Ian Watson
David Redd

James A Corrick
Paul Beardsley
David V Barrett

Feature by:-
Sarah Lefanu

Film Reviews:-
Kim Newman

Book Reviews



EDDIE JONES, who is our cover artist this month, is almost certainly one of the most prolific artists in the SF field. He has had covers world wide, including most of the original STAR TREK covers in America and over 800 covers for the German fortnightly SF magazine TERRA ASTRA.

The inside pages have artwork from two Artists with contrasting styles. Pete Walker, whose work illustrates THE SCAR and HONKY TONK MAN, and Roger Morgan who provided artwork for PLEASE SIR, CAN WE KILL SOMETHING, FROM THE ANNALS OF THE ONOMASTIC SOCIETY and our leading story Storm Constantine's THE VITREOUS SUZERAIN.

THE GATE

SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY



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WELCOME to issue No. 3 of 'The Gate'. As we have now achieved newstand distribution we are confident that the delays which beset us in earlier issues will become less, and hopefully disappear altogether.

I think that anyone who enjoyed our last issue will be even more pleased with our line up this time. SF Fans to whom *The Gate 3* is their first, will, I am sure, enjoy it and look forward to no. 4. Of course there will be many who will criticise, and I trust that constructive comments will find the way to the Gate's office.

In this issue we have included, at the request of our readers, some Book Reviews and also the first in a series of features.

Whilst *The Gate* wishes to explore new directions for SF Magazines, the very nature of the publishing business dictates format to a large extent, this, coupled with commercial demands makes untried avenues very risky to tread. However, undaunted by all that, any interesting suggestions for future issues will be most welcome and could well be taken up if only on a trial basis. (We'll try anything once)

Our next issue will see an amazing improvement because we are going 'up market' in the quality of paper upon which *The Gate* is printed. This will ensure that Artwork, photos, colours and overall appearance will be greatly enhanced.

At the end of August, I went over to Holland to the World SF Convention. I would like to say hello to the various Americans, Dutch, Germans, French, Norwegians, Swedes, Finns, Russians, Yugoslavs, Australians, Goths, Elves and Atlantians, as well as any other nationalities I've accidentally forgotten. A great time was had by all, a truly international convention.

Cardinal Cox (Joint Acting Ed. and Fashion Advisor)

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The Vitreous Suzerian

Storm Constantine

The days, being of a new and, he suspected, variable length, were entirely disorientating to the new Suzerain of Leeleefam. They told him he had been in residence in the squat palace for three weeks now, yet it seemed like months. 'Guldron, this planet makes me dizzy,' he would say to his withdrawn, long-fingered principal aide. Guldron was not a native either, but Claude envied her adaptability. Perhaps it signified only a lack of imagination. Suzerain Claude Enquito also craved company. Back in the governmental office on Abbey Five, he had enjoyed his work; the social life being perhaps more fulfilling than his job, but here on Sheller's Brake in the province of Leeleefam, he felt alone, surrounded by people who would obey his every word but whom he could never call friends. It was almost as if this new position, which in financial terms was certainly a promotion, was really some kind of punishment for misdemeanour — a banishment. He'd often thought about this, wondering whether he'd unwittingly offended some high-ranking person on Abbey Five, but could think of nothing. He'd always been a popular man and it had been for this reason he'd been offered the suzerainship of Leeleefam, or so his superiors had told him. There had been warnings of course. Working on a world where there was subdued native culture was never a straightforward operation.

Leeleefam had been a nonchalant host to humankind for about three years now. Sheller's Brake was a planet rich in ores and Seven Worlds Enterprises had lost no time in staking a claim there when it had first been discovered; a moon-ringed radiant ball hanging at the edge of Wineburst Star's planetary system. Whatever lofty notions humankind had started out with when it had acquired enough knowledge to traverse the infinity of space, had degenerated locally into the usual commercial power struggles. Naturally, 'locally' now meant something rather greater than the distance comfortably travelled in an hour or so; it referred somewhat carelessly to the entire solar systems and star clusters. Gulfs of culture wider than anyone from the past

could ever imagine had divided the human race into a multitude of diverse races; each seemed to adapt psychologically to the environment it found itself in. Great empires had never been realised; the universe was too vast for that. Claude Enquito belonged to a society of assorted ethnic origins that had control of a handful of planets. They were industrialists not tyrants. The fact that Sheller's Brake had indigenous life of its own had not been regarded as a cue for conquest but merely as an inconvenience. It necessitated being very careful; civilised humans went to great pains not to interfere with or upset native cultures less advanced than their own. It did not prevent, however, the use of local labour for less than princely salaries.

It was mid-day and a colliding scum of vague moons were already advancing above the horizon. Claude Enquito looked up from the screen where figures and glyphs proclaimed a stultifying mass of information about local minerals. He tried not to be downhearted about his position, being wise enough to realise that with time, familiarity might plane the edges from his feeling of alienation. People had to get used to him as much as he had to get used to them, and their location. However, there were times in the day when he would have liked to sit back, sip something hot and sweet in the company of like minds and gossip about inconsequential things. None of the human population of Leeleefam seemed disposed to idle chatter. They had evolved their own identity here, for which the first suzerain could probably claim responsibility, and it seemed a sombre and joyless one to Claude, who was used to the frivolity of Abbey Five. He regarded through narrow eyes the small glass ornament which sat on his desk-top; a gift from his new colleagues. Rather like he found them, he thought it a singularly cold and uninteresting thing. Its novelty was in the fact that it had been donated by the local Leelees, the natives (a term all employees of Seven Worlds Enterprises were discouraged from implementing in daily speech). Claude had accepted it with forced gratitude on the day of his arrival and it had sat, gathering dust, beside his console

ever since; an uninspiring and shapeless lump. What it was supposed to represent, he could not tell. However, something about its shape disturbed him if he looked at it too long; an aversion which Claude thought merely mirrored his current discontent.

Ively Guldron swept into the office, disturbing Claude's reverie, trailing domestic staff guiding a floating trolley of food. 'I would like to join you for lunch,' Guldron said, which Claude wearily thought was the price to pay for yearning company.

'By all means. Put your feet up,' he said and Guldron sniffed the slightest of sniffs before perching on the edge of a seat. The food, like the people of this complex, was dull and did little to stimulate the senses, concentrating more on the no-nonsense business of correct nutrition. Claude knew that Guldron wouldn't have joined him if there wasn't something on her mind. He had the feeling that a meal interrupting the flow of a day's work could never be consumed with pleasure by the woman. He was right. She had barely taken one careful nibble of food before coming to the point.

'The Leelees have requested an audience with you,' she said. He stared, dumbly, unsure of what reaction to exhibit.

She chewed, swallowed and shook her head briefly, creasing her brows. 'Oh, don't worry, it's quite in order. Usually, they don't want to come near us, apart from on salary day, but it seems to be some kind of custom with them to make a formal welcome to a new suzerain. Bizarre title, I'm sure you'll agree, but we had to have something they'd like and it's the only word in human language having approximately the same meaning to each of us.'

'Manager would be rather mundane, I agree, Claude said.

'You don't understand. It's nothing to do with the sound of the word, but the way your face works when you say it. These people are aliens, Claude, and I mean, aliens. It's no use trying to anthropomorphise them. It simply won't work. You probably have more in common with a dog.'

He wondered whether the implied metaphor was deliberate, but her mind seemed on other things. 'So, when do I see them?'

'Oh, I arranged it for this afternoon. Might as well get the whole thing out of the way, because we have work to do for the ores shipment next week. You have robes, you know. You'd better put them on. Leelees like that kind of thing and we like to please them whenever possible. They were always trying to badger your predecessor. *He* learned the knack of dealing with them quickly.' (Hint or criticism? Claude wondered). 'I suppose we must be like gods to them or something,' Guldron continued. Claude couldn't repress an inward wince. She smiled smugly. 'However, they're good workers and not much trouble, so we indulge them occasionally.'

That was her summary of an entire culture; alien as she had mentioned and doubtless richer in strangeness and possible new lessons for the human race than could be imagined. The representatives of S.W.E. kept the natives happy with the least possible inconvenience to themselves, and regarded them as exotic animals, albeit a rare species to be preserved and, undeniably, rather

useful.

Claude Enquito waited to receive his visitors in a skylit room, decorated with exuberant examples of local flora. He was nervous. Guldron came to wait with him, sighing and tapping her foot to show that she had more pressing business awaiting her elsewhere. 'I've not had much experience of this kind of thing,' Claude said. Ively Guldron shrugged as if to say there was nothing to it. She was looking out of the window.

'Ah, wonderful, at last. Here they come.'

Claude went to stand beside her. A troupe of perhaps twenty Leelees were being escorted up the paved walkway to the palace. As most intelligent species that humanity had fallen across in its travels, superficially the Leelees appeared very manlike, having similar facial features, four limbs and a vertical spine. They were chatting animatedly together, their hands and faces writhing and flitting and flickering so fast, they became a blur. As a contrast, the escorting humans bore the countenances of statues.

'See the big eartha? That's Zozozo, whom we presume to be the leader of the local community. An impressive lump, eh?' Claude was surprised at Ively's attempt at humour, the first he'd experienced here. He had to agree with her though. The leading Leelee was striding purposely ahead of the others, well over six foot high, heavy-limbed, wide, and sporting a wild costume of artful rags that fluttered behind like sails. Leelees were comprised of three sexes, of which the earthas were the nearest to female, being the bearers of young. The rest of Zozozo's group was comprised of energetic wafts, biologically the intermediary between the seed-bearing flyers and the mammoth, fertile earthas. Claude had only seen Leelees from a distance before.

Zozozo was not terrifying to look at. She was awesome yes, simply because of her size, but on the whole she resembled nothing other than a large, fat woman. Claude, however, was terribly afraid. There are no words to convey the primal fear brought forth in the human psyche by having to face a creature essentially un-human. Having lived a far from cosmopolitan life in the cosy little governmental complex on Abbey Five, Claude had not had direct contact with a non-human before. As he quailed, Guldron swept briskly forward, smiling and nodding, saying, 'Hello, hello, hello.'

'Hello, hello, hello,' intoned Zozozo gravely and, executing a series of alarming grimaces, bent primly from the waist in a formal bow. Claude was wondering whether he would faint. Bright waftish eyes surveyed him with interest, faces peeking round the imposing bulk of their queen, all blinking, twitching and wrenching their features into impossible expressions. Zozozo had queerly grey skin, which appeared smooth, perhaps finely furred. Behind her, the wafts had flushed a deep buttercup colour with excitement.

'Zozozo, may I present Claude Enquito, the new suzerain of our establishment here in Leeleefam,' Guldron said, enunciating carefully.

The Leelee queen emitted a sound which may have been laughter and waved her arms swiftly in a series of meaningful gestures.

'Zoozoorain, yes, gooood!' she exclaimed, exposing her teeth until it seemed her lips were inside out. The

teeth themselves were alarming; spadelike and irregular as if used to tearing fibres completely different from those familiar to human mouths. Guldron threw Claude a private glance.

'Pleased to meet you,' he said. The Leelees appeared to consider his words, then Zozozo threw up an arm with the half-intelligible remark, 'Too steef, too steef, skeen to night night. Feel go eenside!' She thumped her chest and roared with delight. 'Out heer! Out heer!'

Claude realised she had been addressing him. He peered at Guldron in mute appeal.

'Zozozo feels the colour of your skin is caused by a stiffness of emotion boiling inside you. She advises you to let it out.'

'Satan's teeth!' Claude responded, weakly.

Zozozo had shuffled forward and, leaning towards Claude, muttered confidentially, her face juggling a chaotic multitude of expressions, 'Special special for you. Heer.' She gestured behind her and with a buzz of twittering the wafts ejected a seemingly protesting figure from their midsts. 'Say hello, hello, hello!' she commanded and with a motherly thrust, propelled the unfortunate waft in the direction of the self-consciously contained human beings before her.

'Hello, hello, hello,' said the waft.

'Happee!' cried the Leelee queen and with a bellow, arranged her troupe about her and marched out without another word.

Silence surged in to fill the space left by the Leelees. Claude leaned weakly on a table. Guldron stood stiffly to attention, arms straight by her sides, fists clenched, nostrils flaring. 'Never before!' she said.

The waft looked from one to the other of them; its skin colour had faded to a tentative cream. It was impossible to read the expression on its face. Several untranslatable flickers convulsed its features but, other than that, it

remained silent.

'Guldron, would you tell me what the hell has just happened please?' Claude said. 'I feel like I've been standing face-first into a hurricane.'

Guldron had repossessed herself. Claude could see her temperature gauge sweeping sleekly back to normal. 'What had just happened, Claude, is that Zozozo had presented you with a . . . gift. This waft.' Both humans stared at the gift in a moment of mutual dissatisfaction.

'Naturally, our language caused them a bit of a problem at first,' Ively Guldron said. 'Took them a year or so to get the hang of the basics. We arranged to have teachers sent in, linguists from Wipple College.'

'Pity you couldn't instill a little diplomacy along with the lingo!' Claude was still feeling shaken. Taking control, Guldron had seen to it that the waft had been taken off somewhere and entertained until they could decide what to do with it.

'My dear suzerain, that *was* diplomacy. At least, diplomacy leele-style. They always speak their minds; artifice is unknown to them. Likewise tact. Zozozo couldn't comprehend in a million years the social graces of human culture and even if she could, she'd think it ridiculous. These people wear their hearts on their faces, so to speak. In a word, they are honest.'

'That, more than anything, proclaims them truly alien!' Claude decided and went to pour himself a large drink.

'Perhaps you can understand now why we discourage intercourse with the Leelees,' Guldron said, an image of correct behaviour.

'And conversation too, I trust!'

Guldron didn't even twitch. 'We can't risk offending Zozozo. Well, not offending, exactly, that's not the word, because I don't believe you *can* offend a Leelee. They are susceptible to disappointment, however, and that affects their work. We have that big order coming up. . .' She shook her head, bared her teeth and tapped them with a bony finger. 'You'll have to play the game a while, Claude.'

'Meaning what exactly?'

'Let the Leelee hang around. They don't generally get in the way, but they're rather curious, like children. Give it a few toys and it'll be happy for weeks. O.K.?'

'Guldron, I won't feel comfortable with that weird thing hanging round me.'

Guldron smothered exasperation. 'Look, Claude, it is a kind of honour, after all Zozozo is concerned for you. The Leelees change colouring all the time; it exhibits moods in them. She doesn't understand we don't do that. They've never seen a human as dark as you before, therefore, she thinks you're worried.'

'Wonderful. She's right. At this moment, I am worried.'

That evening Ively Guldron invited Claude over for dinner. When he got there the waft had been placed on display ready for him, perched on a stool by the glass-topped table. It was chattering away, grimacing, apparently to itself; a thin, waif-like creature, pale lemon of skin, with thick golden hair, strangely streaked with black. Claude thought that it looked like an abused infant and recoiled at the door, which had already slid shut behind him. The waft turned its heart-shaped face



toward him which for several seconds became unusually void of expression.

'Well, come in,' Guldron said. She was relaxing on an air-filled lounge, drink in hand, keeping an eye on her staff as they set the table for the meal. Claude had never seen Ively Guldron out of work hours before and was surprised by what appeared to be a relaxed mien. He edged towards her, unable to take his eyes off the waft. Like Zozozo the creature emanated a profoundly disturbing aura.

'Perhaps the Leelees think it's time we understood them a little better,' Guldron said. 'Is that so, Vava?' The waft flicked its glance away from Claude, its skin deepening a shade, and said to her,

'You understand *us*. We don't understand you.'

'Good command of our language, eh, Claude?'

'Your faces never say *anything*. You are disabled in that way.'

With that observation, the waft resumed concentration on its own fingers which were conversing to each other rapidly and silently.

Ively dismissed the creature from her mind, producing a sheaf of print-outs. 'Fetch the suzerain something to drink,' she instructed one of her maids. 'Claude, come here, There's something we should discuss.'

So much for the social evening, Claude thought. He stared blindly at the papers Guldron was stabbing at with urgent fingers and her words didn't penetrate his mind. The drink he'd been offered was low on alcohol and unpleasantly sweet. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the waft watching them intently.

'So you see,' Guldron was concluding. 'We have to be ready in three days at the latest for the next phase, otherwise the whole procedure could be held up for weeks. What do you think?'

'Er. . .'

'He thinks he would rather be at home now with something stronger in his glass,' the waft announced. There was a moment's icy silence.

'Perhaps we should eat,' Guldron said.

The meal was usual Leelee fare. Claude didn't have much of an appetite. He was beginning to think seriously about applying for a transfer. Promotion or not, he'd be happier going back to Abbey Five with less status, less money but blissful normality around him. Guldron continued to talk about shipments, thinking out loud more than trying to have a discussion.

'This food's not right,' the waft said, breaking into Guldron's diatribe. Its skin now displayed a distinctly mustard shade.

'What's wrong with it?' she asked sharply, impatiently.

'It's just not interesting. It doesn't taste of anything. Can I have something else?'

'It's all we have. This is what humans eat, Vava, and it certainly won't poison you, so unless you want to feel hungry in the night, I suggest you eat it too.'

The waft exhibited an array of private grimaces and then picked at the food. Claude experienced an unmistakable warming towards the little creature. It *was* childlike; small and ingenious. Perhaps if he just looked on it as a rather odd child, he wouldn't feel so discomforted.

'Why did Zozozo leave you with us? he asked it.

'To make you glow. You people never do, but you must be worse than the others.'

'Why?'

The creature wriggled, which Claude interpreted as the equivalent of a shrug. 'Zozozo thinks so. She's always right.'

Guldron was staring at Claude over the table, her look implying what ridiculous creatures these Leelee were. Claude couldn't wait to leave.

Claude walked back home through the soft multiple moonlight with the waft zipping this way and that across the lawn in front of him. Ively Guldron had insisted he take it with him. After an evening in Vava's company, Claude didn't feel quite so alarmed about it. In fact he was beginning to think he had more in common with the waft than he did with Guldron. Soft, mournful cries, the night-song of the flyers, came to his ears from beyond the complex. Of all the Leelee, the flyers were the most peculiar to behold, and the least seen. Pale and limber, they kept to their tree-top villages, never flying exactly, as they had no wings, but leaping gracefully from branch to branch in an almost simian way. The waft uttered fluting sounds back occasionally, but was clearly far from interested in answering the calls.

After a short walk through the low colonnades of the outer palace structure, they reached Claude's own apartments. Soft lights blossomed about the eaves when their mechanisms sensed his approach. There was nobody else about; security was not a problem in Leeleefam. Once inside, Claude went straight to his drinks cabinet to satisfy the craving he'd suffered all evening. The waft walked round his livingroom looking with interest at his possessions.

'Are you tired? Do you people sleep? Claude asked.

'Yes. Doesn't everything? The waft jumped up and down in front of him, spinning, chattering, its skin an astounding shade of daffodil yellow. Claude turned his back.

'Let's get one thing straight, Vava. You can't make me glow, whatever that is. My skin's not darker than Guldron's because I'm unhappier than she is. Humans are all different colours, but we can't change the one we're born with, at least not naturally. Undersand?'

Vava stopped jumping. 'No. Neither do you. Can I have some of that?' It pointed to his drink.

'I don't think so. I'm going to sleep now. What do you want to do?'

'Sit and listen for a while. I'll sleep here later. Goodnight.'

It skipped to the sofa and sat with its forearms on the plump backrest, staring out of the window at the moonlight. Claude sighed and went into his bedroom.

In the morning, Claude tried to persuade the waft to stay in his living quarters. Vava didn't seem to understand what he was saying, which Claude found suspicious in view of the little creature's astounding grasp of human speech the previous night. He wondered if the Leelees were as honest as Guldron thought. 'Stay here!' Claude commanded as he backed towards the door that led to

his offices. Vava sped past him emitting a series of squeaks, to which to Claude's ears sounded ominously jubilant.

By mid-morning, the vivacity of the Leelee had caused his head to spin. Unable to concentrate on his work because of the antics of his guest, he stabbed a few pause buttons and sat back to have a hot drink. The waft was at his side in an instant, the writhings of its features resembling the palsy of some terrible disease. Claude grimaced and turned away. 'Why?' the waft asked. Claude looked back and found his expression parodied repeatedly.

'Stop it!'

The waft looked perplexed. 'But why?' it said and tentatively mimicked the expression one more time. Claude caught on.

'Your conversation makes me dizzy,' he said. Before the Leelee could make a response the comm buzzer sounded on Claude's desk.

He tapped out the reply code. 'Yes?'

'Ivey Guldron wonders if you have a few minutes to spare,' the tinny voice of his secretary replied; a creature possibly even less entertaining than Guldron. Claude silently groaned and rubbed his face.

'I'm sorry, you'll have to tell her I'm up to my neck in it until this afternoon,' he said, averting his gaze from the silent screen in front of him, the empty correspondance racks. 'After lunch, O.K.?'

'Very well, suzerain Enquitto.' The connection was broken. Claude shook his head.

'You have gone darker!' the waft accused. Before he could stop himself, Claude's glance flicked down to his hands, where, naturally, he could see no difference at all.

'No, Vava, I haven't. Be useful and get me a top-up from that machine over there. Have one yourself if you like.' The waft took his cup, but its gaze never left his face.

'You spoke mistakenly,' it said. 'You deliberately spoke mistakenly.; There was a kind of wonder in its voice and its features writhed in slow, folding gestures.

Claude realised it was referring to how he had put Guldron off seeing him that morning. 'Clearly, you haven't spent much time with humans,' he said with a smile, a smile that, undeniably, covered an insidious twinge of shame caused by the open expression of innocent shock on the waft's face.

'Why didn't you say what she couldn't see? That she damps your glow and makes your head sleepy?'

Claude had to laugh. 'I don't think Guldron would appreciate that Vava.'

'What do you mean?'

Claude sighed. He remembered what Guldron had told him about the Leelee inability to dissemble. He was too weary to try and explain. 'It's just something we do. Now forget it,' he said. The Leelee's attention had now been taken by the ornament beside Claude's console. It picked the thing up and again exhibited signs of shock and dismay.

'What is it this time?' Claude asked, trying to take the glass away from it. The Leelee stepped backwards, clutching the ornament firmly. It had gone very pale.

'No glow, no glow at all!' it said and held the glass up

to the light, shaking its head in disbelief. 'You haven't used it!' it cried accusingly. 'No wonder you don't glow!'

'Used it? Give it to me, Vava. What do you mean?'

The waft put the ornament into Claude's hand and leaned close to him, staring into it. The smell and aura of the creature in such close proximity caused Claude to break out into a sweat. He lifted the ornament up and gazed through it; an amorphous lump of cloudy glass.

'We give them to all new humans,' Vava said. 'We thought they helped you. Hasn't anyone taught you how to use it?'

'No. I don't think anyone here knows how, Vava. Perhaps you people didn't explain properly how we should. What is it? I thought it was just an ornament.'

Vava twittered in what Claude took to be amusement. 'Not very ornamental at the moment is it? It's an eeoookha, suzerain.'

'Eeoookha? Claude repeated slowly. 'And what's that?'

'It stores your glow so you can use it in darker times. We all have one. Eeoookhas are something that go back a long, long way.'

'And how does it store one's glow exactly? There was no evidence of even slight luminosity in the glass at present.

'I could show you,' Vava said, hesitating, 'But, because it's your eeoookha, I really shouldn't. It would be... intrusive, like... like...' it held up the empty cup, 'like spitting in your drink. See?'

Claude laughed. 'I don't mind. Here, show me.'

'Very well, then, I'll fill it for you and then you try to take it, but you might not be able to use my glow... you're so different.'

Watching with perplexed interest, Claude handed the waft his ornament. It screwed up its eyes, grimaced, leered, twitched and then calmed. There was a new smell in the room, that Claude could never have described, and a weird feeling as of electricity brushing the skin. Then the waft smiled and Claude looked away from its face to the ornament sitting in its hands.

'Satan's teeth!' he said, almost in a whisper. The glass was glowing with a thousand turning motes of brightness and colour. 'How did you do that?'

'Simple. Try taking some. I don't think it will harm you.'

'How?'

The waft twitched. 'Think it in. I've made it loose. It shouldn't be hard.'

'O.K.' Claude laughed nervously and took the glass in his hands. It felt neither warm nor cold. After staring at it for a moment, he looked up and shrugged. 'Nothing,' he said, sneakily relieved. The waft grimaced and shook its head.

'Not trying,' it said. 'Make your head empty. Think it in.'

'Like a kind of meditation?'

'What?'

'Nothing. I think I get it.' He cleared his throat, settled himself and stared once more into the sparkling glass. Attempting to dismiss any misgivings, he calmed his mind. For a while, nothing happened, other than the feel of the glass weight in his hands, the shifting glow, became soothing, almost hypnotic. Then, as true relaxation spread through Claude's body, an alarming heat suffused his face, which he realized was coming from the glass. Suddenly the whole room was blotted from his sight by a

flash of brightness as if he'd been smacked sharply in both eyes. He cried out and dropped the ornament, flopping back in his chair, then forwards, clutching his face. Gripped by confusion but not pain, he did not think about how it had been rather stupid to do what Vava had asked.

'You alright?' the waft said, pawing his shoulder in quick birdlike gestures.

Claude shook his head. His vision was clearing. Alright? Am I? What happened? Suddenly, he began to laugh. 'Alright? I feel wonderful!' he cried.

The waft clapped its hands and skipped on the spot. 'Yes you do. You're glowing, glowing. You're not dark any more.' Again Claude looked briefly at his hands. No change. He laughed once more.

'Vava, I don't think you meant the colour of my skin when you said I was dark, did you?'

The waft shook its head, uncomprehending. 'You're glowing now anyway,' it said.

'And glowing is... is happiness, right? And contentment and well-being and all that?'

The waft wrinkled its nose. 'If that's how you feel it, then it is,' it said.

'That's how I feel!' Claude said.

'You're not so sorry you came here now,' Vava told him. 'You're saying it, With your glow. I'm glad, and Zozozo will be pleased with me. We didn't realise you weren't using your eeookhas. No wonder your faces are so quiet.'

Claude, who currently felt like skipping, dancing and being utterly child-like for a while, realised that Guldron probably wouldn't want to encourage the use of eeookhas within the complex, even if she knew what they could do. Exuberance might interfere with the work schedules and that would never do for Ms. Guldron. He was pleased he'd proved her wrong about never being able to communicate properly with the Leelees. Pure joy for living was a sentiment that must be the same the universe over.

Vava leaned over Claude's shoulder and deftly turned off his console. Clearly, it had been watching him work far more closely than he'd thought. 'Time for that later,' it said. 'Let's celebrate for a while' It held out its hands. Before taking hold of them, Claude dimmed the windows and locked the doors. Somehow he thought it more prudent not to share his new-found source of enjoyment with Guldron and her like just yet. It would not be approved of, and certainly not understood. Therefore, subtle handling of the subject was called for.

Such matters were indeed for later persual, however. For now, bathing in a delightful intoxication, Claude allowed the Leelee to lead him in a wild, crazy dance. It seemed, if he listened hard enough, there was music to dance to, music from outside; the call of birds, the pulse of wind even the mechanical thump of the complex's machinery. Spinning in circles around the spacious office, they shared the warmth of Vava's glow which seemed to hang between them like a luminous ball. Claude was conscious of the vastness of Sheller's Brake beyond the complex walls; a place he wanted to explore and be part of. Almost drunk with the explosion of joy inside him, he

saw himself as a benevolent mind from beyond the dancing moons with whom the Leelees could share new sensations, experiencing through him the variety of other worlds. From them, he could learn to understand the world that had become his home. The strange calls of the flyers would speak to him too and the wriggling of waftish features would become a language he could speak. The humans of Leeleefam had ignored the richness of the planet they were occupying for too long, so obsessed were they with their desire for commercial success. It occurred to Claude that maybe, just maybe, someone high-up on Abbey Five had thought about this. Could it be possible that it was why the gregarious Claude Enquito had been offered the position in the first place? Guldron could get on with juggling her precious figures and sending out the shipments on time; Claude felt there was for more important work on Sheller's Brake for him to do.

Eventually, he and Vava exhausted themselves and sat on the floor together in the underwater gloom of the shuttered office.

'Tomorrow, I shall begin showing you how to fill the eeookha yourself,' Vava said. 'Then you need never be dark again. And you will stay here, won't you?' Its voice was eager and its slim hands reached for his. 'Zozozo saw the glow inside you all trodden on and spoken sharply to and not allowed out. She saw this and knew you'd be the best person who'd ever come here from the other places in the sky. We want to be friends, Claude, but nobody will speak to us. Not until you, and we all know *you* will.'

Claude picked up the ornament from where it had rolled under a chair. It still emitted a soft radiance and he could see within it the vague form of a tall man in ceremonial robes. A flaw in the glass? Imagination? Perhaps. He reached out and patted Vava's face, who chittered and rubbed against his hand, kitten-like.

'The point of contact is joy,' he thought, 'not smug tolerance, or even a patronising attempt at understanding, just utter, child-like joy.'

'We'll learn to talk,' he said and, for a moment, the eeookha glowed brighter with the faintest shade of purest blue.

Storm Constantine

Storm Constantine is the author of the Wraeththu trilogy, and her latest novel, HERMETECH, will be published in January 1991, by Headline Books.

Honky Tonk Man

James A Corrick

Samson Brodie was a Honky Tonk Man. His world was a constant babble of background conversations, interspersed with overlaid waitresses and overloaded patrons. No fame for him. No concerts, except the ones he paid to see. No platinum albums. He was a club singer, an entertainer of the bar crowd. Nothing more.

With an old, scarred acoustic Gibson, he sang the old songs, the ones to which ordinary working people drank and danced. Sometimes he played with pickup bands, sometimes alone. It was all the same to him.

Almost every night he worked surrounded by the smell of sweat, stale beer, and old smoke. Women sometimes tried to pull him down to dance; men sometimes tried to pick fights. But he didn't mind. It was his world, and he loved it. For Sam, nothing could match the excitement of a clapping, stomping Saturday night honky tonk crowd. That was the best of times.

Or so it had been for the first decade and half of his career. But times change, and for Sam Brodie, it was no longer the best of times.

But even the longest road has an end, and Sam had reached his. Not that he had been seeking it. Still it had arrived with no less finality for all that. It came disguised as Pioneer Andy's Bar and Grill, one of the few operating bars left in a country gone completely hungry for computer-simulated entertainment.

By his own accounting, Sam had played more bars and small clubs than any other live singer. "Well, ain't really much of a claim," he told Sharon his second wife. This was a month after their marriage and two years before their divorce. ("Honky Tonk Man can't keep the honeys," Sam would always say as he launched into his rendition of Dan Seals "Three-Time Loser.")

"No," he told Sharon, "ain't nothin' to it. Almost no one else plays *live* anymore. They're all signed to comp-sim contracts."

"But Sam, that makes you all the more special. You earn your keep playin' for real, live people when all them others are content to model for computer simulation. Hell, Sam, you make those crowds want a sweatin',

breathin' guitar man. Who else is there but you now that Travis quit? If that isn't somethin', I don't know what is."

"Yeah," he said, "yeah, that's a point, ain't it?"

But it wasn't enough, and in the end, few people wanted to *see* Sam — or anyone else, guitar playing or otherwise. How could anyone — at least human? — compete with images and events shoved directly into a man or woman's brain. That's what the biochip allowed. A single, giant protein molecule, constructed an atom at a time by molecular machines and only visible with best electron microscopy, each one — tiny though it was — had a computing capacity in the billions of bytes. And the speed was enormously faster than the swiftest of the old silicon-chip computers.

Scientific research revealed in the utility of the biochip, while doctors used it to tap into and monitor the bodily processes of their patients. One intrepid group was even trying to use the organic computer to talk from mind to mind — a sort of electronic telepathy.

But the biochip came into its own when the entertainment business appropriated it — snatching it up faster than Pizarro took Peru. They also knew gold when they saw it.

Plant it at the base of your brain, and then the CompNet could give you anything. Want to be with Marco Polo? Don't read about it, don't watch it on TV. Plug in, and hell you can *be* Marco Polo.

You can feel the cold wind of the mountain passes and the hot sand of the deserts against your skin. You can make love to the beauties (female or male, your choice) along the way. You can see with your own eyes the Imperial Chinese Court. So what if it makes no pretense to history accuracy? Who cares if it leaves out the pain and sickness of the real explorers. Who wanted any of that? (Well, not too many.)

And singers? Why you could have the most famous rocker or classical violinist play just for you. Or you could create an entire concert hall, overfill it with fans (if you didn't like noise, they could be quiet fans), and put yourself right at the edge of the stage.

Just buy the right software, and your biochip did the rest. It gave you sound better than the real thing, not to mention sight and smell. Whatever you needed to make it real. And it was convenient. Right there in your own home. No traffic, no crowds to fight, and always the best seat in the house. "Home Entertainment?" the ads shouted. "You won't even know you have a home and won't give a damn either!"

Eventually the control these dream worlds offered the user became so seductive that fewer and fewer came back to those homes. Now, the sleepers were the rule, and people like Sam the exception.

So, with the last cords of Steve Earl's "Nowhere Road" fading away, Sam Brodie looked up and saw the present — and the future — of his biochip world. In quiet desperation, he scanned the completely deserted interior of Pioneer Andy's. The stacked chairs and empty tables were his Tarot Cards, and they proffered nothing, not even cold comfort. For three years, Sam had played here as the house singer. Now that was at an end.

He and Andy had watched in dismay as fewer and fewer people came in to drink and listen to Sam. For over a month now, no one had been in but Sam and Andy. And after tonight, even they were not coming back.

Putting aside his guitar, Sam stood up, almost for a second seeing and hearing the applause of a large, rowdy, overflowing Saturday night crowd. But only for a moment.

His boots echoed hollowly as he walked to the bar and looked into the round, bland face of the bar's owner and now only bartender.

"Last night, Andy."

"Yeah, last night. Have a brew before I lock up."

Taking the beer, Sam looked around again. "Why bother? Nobody's been here for weeks. Nobody's coming again — ever. Especially not them Sleepyheads."

"There's some Walkers like us."

"Yeah, I suppose. You have anything worth stealing here?"

"No. But," apologetically his sloped, fat shoulders, "I wouldn't feel right about leaving the old place open. Habit."

Andy poured himself a beer, and for a long minute, the two leaned against the bar drinking and looking at the marred bartop. Someone long ago had scratched on the spot near Sam's right elbow, "Cowboys have more fun."

Sam snorted. Even he had never seen a real cowboy. Sang about them sure. But seen one? Hell, the last died long ago, ranches having given way to meat farms and ranchers to genetic engineers who grew everything from beef to chicken to pork. And even the gene splicers had gone Sleepyhead and turned the operations over to the computers.

"What now, Sam?" asked Andy.

"Don't know. I've survived for thirty years on nickles and dimes, but I don't even know where there's any loose change anymore. Guess I'll go home and think."

"Ain't no more change, Sam. Just cred, and thinking like that's bad. Seen a lot of good people sit for days pondering things they can't change. Next thing they're Sleepyheads, stashed like a cord of wood in a sealed room until they die, their biochip juiced full of the life they wanted but didn't have."

"Yeah, but Andy, what's the answer?"

Andy made some halfhearted swipes at the bar. Then threw the rag away not so much in disgust as resignation.

"Christ if I know. Not even sure I know the question. Well, guess we'll find out."

"Yeah, sure."

Sam took another swig of his beer, wondering briefly who — or what — had made it and for how much longer. Feeling the dark pressure of despair, he turned and looked around the room once more. And once more he saw desertion.

"Guess I'll just drift and see if anyone's still going," he said, turning once more to look into the haven of Andy's human face.

"Heard of a place in L.A. Don't know what they play though."

"Probably don't matter. If they ain't closed already, they will be soon. No goddam people there either."

Sam finished his beer and placed the glass carefully on the bar. "Clean that one up and you're through for the night, Andy."

"Yeah, I guess I am." Andy made no attempt to pick up the glass, its foamy sides streaked and cloudy like their future.

Looking into Andy's dark-brown eyes, Sam knew the bar owner wouldn't move the glass. It would still be standing there when Andy locked up. It would be there in the weeks, months, and years to come. As long as it stood there, Andy would feel that he had not given up. Sam liked the gesture. He wished he could believe in its potency.

After placing his guitar in its case, Sam walked to the door. Stopping, he turned and raised a hand in vague farewell to Andy.

"See you, Andy."

"Sure, Sam."

Neither of them believed it.

Sam was half through the doors when he turned for a last time.

"I was King of the Road, wasn't I, Andy?"

"Yeah, Sam, you were. As long as there was a road."

"As long as there was. . ." Was what? Sam felt the world tilt, and for an instance, the bar filled with the jostling, hard drinking crowds he remembered — and for which he would always yearn. Then, even Andy was gone.

Out on the sidewalk, Sam looked up as the neon script, luridly proclaiming "Pioneer Andy's Bar and Grill — Authentic Eats," eased into immutable darkness. Nothing remained now on the night-shrouded street but the occasional streetlight. Left on, he realized bitterly, for reactionary old sons o'bitches like me and Andy to find our way homes. If we had any sense, we would be wrapped up tight in a Sleepyhead cubicle, dreaming up a real world with real people and real passion. Instead, we wander in the dark, bumping from one oasis of light to another. And the last one just closed for us.

Where to, old man?

He looked up and down the street. Nothing but closed and darkened buildings. Sam walked to the nearest and tried the door. It was like pushing against a mountainside.

"Hell, they sure don't want nobody getting in there," he muttered. As he walked down the street, he tried door after door. None budged. Windows when visible at all —

were opaque squares, eternally concealing secrets.

Two blocks later, with a prickling along the back of his neck, he noticed that the buildings no longer even had sealed doors and windows. None at all.

Stopping under one of the omnipresent streetlights, he looked closely at one of the building walls, seeing raw concrete so fresh it showed no weathering. Probably the back of some new warehouse, he thought. But who placed a warehouse on a business street? A waste of good rental space.

"What rental space, Brodie," he said, taking some comfort in the sound of his voice in the all-too-quiet night-world. No one but a few Walkers like him and Andy left. Certainly no one renting stores and offices. And, for that matter no one was building warehouses. Who was left to need them?

No that wasn't quite right. Sleepyhead Silos. Yeah, that must be it. Large, utilitarian buildings filled with Sleepyhead cubicles. Inside, featureless walls loomed, looking on men and women wrapped in the thin membranes of their medbeds. Tubes and monitor wires kept the body alive and the muscles from completely atrophying. Living mummies wrapped tight in plastic.

The street was gone, and he looked in claustrophobic horror at the blank gray walls of the cubicle. Turning he saw the struggling figure of a Sleepyhead, its features smeared into anonymity by its medbed membrane. A voice almost inarticulate with disuse croaked for help. It made him want to puke.

Then he was back on the street, his back hardpressed against the rough *exterior* wall. Was the scene he had

seen happening just on the other side? "No," he yelled into the night. Then more softly, "No, just too much stress, too much booze. Hard times vex a man. Turn his imaginings sour." That was it Imagination gone wild for a moment.

Hell, what did he know about the inside of a Sleepyhead cubicle? He'd never been in one. But Sharon knew — knows, he corrected. She went Sleepyhead after the divorce, or maybe she went Sleepyhead and got the divorce. He wasn't sure even to this day. That had been during his Hank Williams phase, Hard drinking that had left him vague about three years of his life, including most of his marriage to Sharon.

He had always been sure he and his drinking had put her in that Sleepyhead cubicle. The shrink had said he would probably always feel guilty about it. Yeah, his mind had created that hallucination: Sharon trying to get out. Out of what. His life or hers?

Shaking his head, he pushed himself away from the wall and gave it a hard look. Only the wall of a building, no more transparent than any other piece of reinforced concrete and just as solid. If he wanted, he could walk around and find the service entrance to the Silo. But why bother? No one inside he wanted to see. No one inside who wanted to see him. No, time to get home.

Home, yeah, the trailer that his meager earnings at Andy's bought him. Or had bought him. Home with its warped, almost illegible sign, "Trailers" and below it in even more faded lettering "For Sale or Rent."

Well, he would have to work out something on the rent. In the morning, then, have to talk with . . . Odd, he couldn't think of the manager's name. Well, he — or was it she? Not even a goddamn face!

No one had a face any more. But still, he should be able to remember the old bastard — or was that bitch? — who ripped him off monthly — or was that weekly?

Sam stopped in the purple pooling under streetlight. Concentrating, fearing he was going insane from not merely losing his livelihood, but his very reason for living, he pried into every corner of his mind. No memory surfaced as to a name or a face for the manager of the trailer park.

Now he couldn't even remember how much rent he paid. Just tired, he told himself. Just tired.

He didn't believe it for a second.

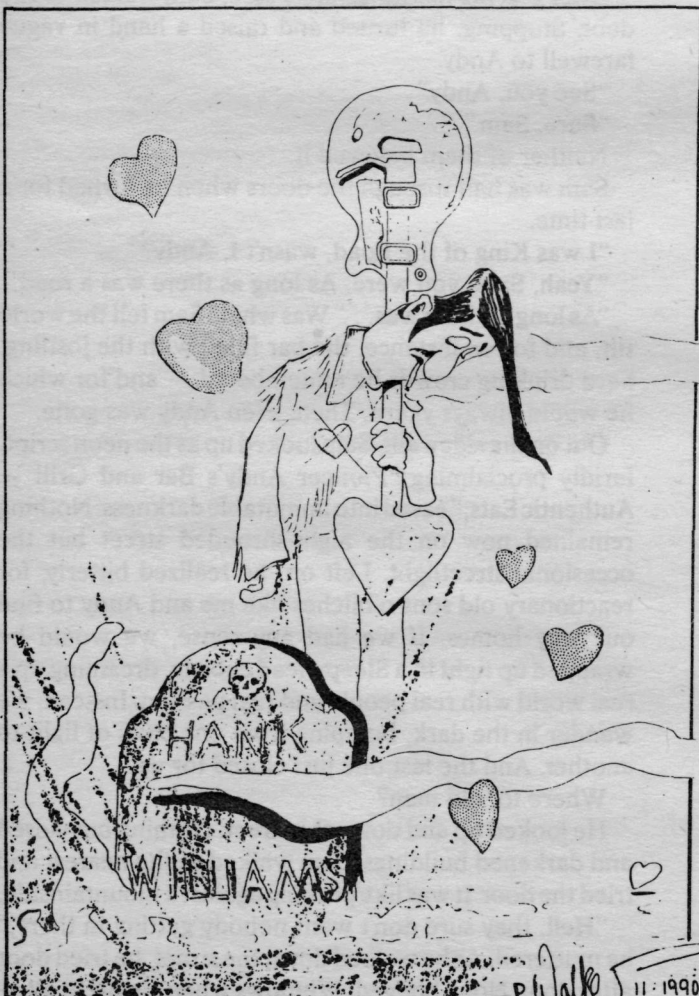
"Hey, poppa-man, spare some jingle?" The voice was young, but firm. The hand outstretched for the handout leaped from the darkness like a giant, inverted spider. Sam reached out and grabbed the arm beyond and dragged the questioner closer.

"Hey, poppa-man, you want something for your change, all you gotta do is ask. Don't break the arm. It's part of a matched set. Very valuable."

Sam didn't say anything. He just stared at the face the streetlight outlined in its purple glare, Two eyes, a nose, and mouth. Good, thought Sam, that's normal, that's sane. He didn't care much for the bald head with its iridescent swirls or the fluorescent tattooing of lips, eyelids, and earlobes. Nor did he find it attractive that every tooth was stained a different color.

"You real?" asked Sam.

"Suck me and find out, poppa-man. Hell, you holding tight my arm. If I ain't real, you're a gonzo imaginer."



"Maybe so," muttered Sam, letting go of the arm.

"You got that change? Or you want me to buy it from you," the stranger asked.

"No, no, have some . . . change? Who the hell has change? Everything's cred-cards."

The long-fingered hand reached up and closed around the face and pulled. The flesh stretched and twisted like parti-colored taffy. The fingers like those of some mad baker kneaded the face like dough, pulling and pushing and then smoothing.

Between the fingers, Sam's fascinated gaze saw the sharp beak of a nose metamorphose into a small, broken-back lump. The thin, narrow lips grew blubbery with fat, and the hollows of cheeks filled and rose into small mounds of flesh. As the hands fell away, Sam was looking at Andy. The head was still bald and the tattoos still fluoresced.

"Change? What're you talking about, Sam? I told you already there isn't any more change, just cred."

Sam backed away, but the colorful apparition paced him. The hand was again extended, but now it thrust forward, fingers flat, together, the whole looking like the blade of a spear. Sam pushed his guitar case up and forward.

"Hey, Sam, that's a great idea. How about playing something?"

"Play something?" Sam said, disbelief etching every syllable.

"Sure, make the night pass faster. Let's see. How 'bout 'Guitar man out of Control? No? 'Tonight We're Gonna Tear Down the Walls'? Not that either, eh? Well, we'll just keep that until later then. Let's try something different now, like 'Digging up Bones.'"

The hand pulled back, and it and its mate once more reached up and pulled and knuckled the flesh. This time Sam stared in horror at Sharon's face. He noticed that one of her eyebrows was Andy's shaggy black, not her plucked gold. Her teeth were still a rainbow.

"Hey, Sam. Been a long time. Last time I saw you was . . ."

" . . . two days before you went Sleepyhead," he finished.

"Always hated that habit of yours, Sam. Finishin' my sentences. Made me feel predictable."

"Who are you?" he asked, backing up. The hand was coming up and feeling for the face a third time.

"Why, Sam. You know me. I'm . . ." Sam watched in sick fascination as a new face peered out from between the busy fingers. No, not a single face, but two faces. An older man and woman's features fused and merged, mouth twisted in contempt and rage. A face he did not recognize — and yet, did. Something in his mind screamed that they belonged to him more surely than any other face he had or would see tonight.

"Samson!" the man-woman bellowed. "Samson, how could you have . . ."

He ran.

His booted feet rang loudly on the sidewalk. But the farther and faster he ran, the softer were those sounds. Looking down, all Sam could see was a blur of feet and legs. It was like some old twentieth century cartoon.

He yelled in fright and tried to slow down. A mistake. Losing his balance, he pitched forward, landing solidly

on his chin. The pain sent his mind reeling back toward his own private night.

He didn't quite make it. His eyes refocused, and he saw his guitar case by his right hand, clasp broken and Gibson dumped out. Hearing a noise behind him, he turned his head and looked up. It was Maureen, his first wife. Her smile was a rainbow of impossible colors.

"Play for me, Sammy. Play for me like you used to do when we first met."

"No, no, go away. I don't play anymore. They don't let me."

"Oh, but Sam Brodie always plays. You're the Honky Tonk Man, remember?"

"No, you got the wrong guy, lady. I ain't no Honky Tonk Man."

"Then, who are you?"

He tried to remember. His name, yes, but more. Not even a face. He was a cipher to himself.

"Try and play, Guitar Man, just try and play. Maybe you'll remember who you really are."

His hand groped out and closed around the guitar, dragging it closer. Rolling over on his back, not looking at the thing with the rainbow teeth, he fumbled for a chord.

"What . . . what should I play?" he asked.

"Oh, anything. Howabout 'Baby's Got Her Blue Jeans On'? You always said that was me."

"Did I"

"No, you never said no such thing. You just dreamed it" The laughter that came was ghostly. It sounded like some poor bastard gasping for breath around a chicken bone.

To escape, he strummed the strings and began singing. His confidence rose as he became more and more immersed in the music. Maybe he was the Honky Tonk Man. What was his name again? He had it just a minute ago. Oh yes, Sanford . . . No, no, it was Samuel . . . no, Samford . . . no Sam . . .

Then he hit a bad note. Well, everyone did that. He played through as he had long since learned to do.

Then he hit another. He looked up and around, but the laughing-thing was gone. He was alone on the street under the baleful scrutiny of a streetlight. His fingers seemed to fumble and then fumble again. They forgot what he was playing. What the devil was he playing? Desperately, he tried to bring his fingers back under control. Nothing happened. Only discord. Then not even that.

Looking down at hands and guitar, he gasped as his fingers stroked across broken and warped plastic. There were no strings. Nothing but a ruin that once had been a guitar.

Glancing back up, he found, he was no longer on the street. Featureless gray confinement surrounded him. He started to push himself up, but was pulled back by wires and tubes connecting him to a bed. No, not bed, rather padded pedestal. A clicking above his head issued from a monitor panel. Folded down along the sides were the halves of a plastic cocoon.

A medbed.

He was in a Sleepyhead Cubicle.

"No, it can't be!" he protested, shocked and dismayed at the rusty croak that now served him for a voice. How long could he sing with that voice?

He was incredibly weak, and the weight of the guitar pulled his right arm down, the ruin sliding inexorably down the side of the bed toward the floor. With a determined grip, he kept the instrument from falling out of his trapped reach. Why he held onto the musical wreck he didn't know. Its condition made him want to cry.

"How did I get here," he said aloud again, hoping to loosen up his vocal chords, perhaps save some fragment by talking aloud. Then more softly, "Who am I?"

"Samson Brodie, of course," a voice, as flat as the gray of the walls said. Sam managed to sit partially erect, the wires and tubes imprisoning him too firmly for any other movement. He was afraid to rip them loose. He had a vision of his blood draining out across this barren room, which waited thirstily to revive itself.

"Who . . . who're you?"

"A second's thought would provide the answer," the voice said. "But then you have been asleep a long, long time, Samson Brodie. I am your monitor, officially known as Monitor C-168, Sector Four."

"A computer?"

"No, a program or rather a small part of a program. The part that looks after life-suspension cases in the Nashville sector."

"Christ dammit! It's true then? I'm a Sleepyhead. How could I . . . ?" The fleeting memory of stacked chairs and empty tables, a fading neon sign. "Yeah, of course, I must've broke down after Pioneer Andy closed."

"No, Samson Brodie. You entered this cubicle when you reached the eligible age of eighteen and have been here ever since."

"I don't understand."

"I suppose not. It has been too long. You, Samson Brodie, have been dreaming the life of Sam Brodie, the last of the Honky Tonk singers. You read about club singers and watched them on old video tapes. To you, their life was romantic. So, in your dreams you became the Honky Tonk Man, the last great guitar man."

"Romantic? Hell, I was barely scraping out a living in the few bars left. Then they went bust."

"That was the nightmare, caused by an error in the programming of your biochip's software. I regret the problem was too marginal to register until you actually awoke. I am, however, making the necessary correction, which will be complete in one hundred and eighty seconds. Then the disintegration of your dream-world will not even be a troubling memory."

"Dream? That weren't no dream. That was reality, and you're a lying bastard," Sam said. Yet, disintegration certainly described his recent experiences. Too tired to keep sitting upright, he let his body collapse backward, pulling the remains of the guitar up! and onto his chest.

"Lying? Why?"

"To keep me here."

"I have no interest in whether you stay or leave — that is your decision. I exist merely to aid your tenure in your real dream."

"Real dream, hell! I want the real world, not an empty world of Sleepyheads and deadbeats!"

"Have no fear. You will have the world you desire, free of all disturbing elements. It will be as it was meant to be."

"No, you don't understand," Sam said, as he pushed the guitar up like some totem to ward off the evil that surrounded him. "I want to go out in the world and play and sing for the *real* people."

"How can you, Samson Brodie?"

"How can I? Why just like I've always done. Me and my guitar in front of . . ." Then panic clutched him and his hands gripped tightly around the guitar neck, its fretwork gouging ridges in his fingers. "You don't mean," his voice dried into a harsh, dry swallow. "You mean," he tried again, "there ain't any real people? They're all like this? Sleepyheads?"

"Oh, no. Nothing could be further from the truth, Samson Brodie. Life-Suspension is a rarity with less than five per cent of the population opting for it."

"Then every thing is comp-sim?"

"Not that either. Much of it is, but people still enjoy — indeed need — being with other people. Humans are social animals and seem destined to remain so. Consequently, they still attend concerts, plays, ball games, even films. Only a small fraction of the population eschews social intercourse. The most fanatical become Sleepyheads."

"Then, there's a place for me to sing? I can have those live audiences?"

"No. Samson Brodie can never perform in front of a live audience."

"You mean I can't ever leave this cubicle?"

"As I said, that is your decision. But to what end? Have you any musical ability? No. You never mastered the guitar. You brought that wreck into this room as a reminder of why you must dream."

"That can't be, that just can't be."

"Try singing, Samson Brodie. Tell me how you would play any song."

"Why by . . ." But there was nothing. His memory was empty. All he knew about music was something vague about notes and chords. And he wasn't even sure what they were. He tried to remember the fingering of the guitar strings and realized that even if this instrument in his hands had strings, he could not play it.

"You mean it, don't you?"

"I mean nothing. I merely report facts."

"But I don't want to go back!"

"That is Sam Brodie, Honky Tonk Man, speaking — not Sam Brodie, Sleepyhead. No, you will go back, Samson Brodie. There is no place for you out there in the *real* world. Even you realize that. Your world is not today's, but yesterday's."

In fear, Sam pulled the shattered ruin of the guitar up and clasped it to his chest. His right hand began stroking it. The warped, stringless surface was strange and unfamiliar to his hands. Where was the slick plastic of the electric or the smooth varnish of the acoustic?

What the hell was he thinking? He didn't know anything about guitars.

He remembered now. He remembered a childhood and adolescence full of disappointment and sharp failure. An ambitious mother, a demanding father, a brother and sister who touched success no matter what they tried. It had been too much. It was still too much.

"Sam Brodie knows everything there is to know about guitars," a voice whispered. Was it him or the monitor?

"There isn't a note Sam can't pluck out of a guitar."

"No," he screamed. His voice was lost in the muffling closeness of the Sleepyhead cubicle. "No," only a whisper of protest now.

His fingers moved again across the guitar's face, and he cried. His fear and loathing and loneliness were more than any human could bear. He needed release.

Slowly, at first, then with more confidence, his fingers began stroking out the chords of "Guitars, Cadillac." To his ears came the classic rendition of Dwight Yoakam. Then it was his voice singing strong and even as he always sang when the audience was large and receptive.

He looked out over the crowd. Through smoke, he could see the couples whirling across the dance floor to his playing and singing. Behind the bar, Andy was helping his two bartenders draw beers and mix drinks. He was home. What more could a man ask for?

There would always be a place for this Honky Tonk Man.

James A Corrick

Our information on James is limited at the moment to the fact that he is American, and lives in Tucson, Arizona.

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Les temps étrange sur l'île Fisseau

David V Barrett

FRANÇOISE, ALONE, IS SINGING SOFTLY.

Through the shuttered half of the window, yellow slatted light falls on her bed, the floor before it, the wall above it.

She sits on a short wooden bench, barely wide enough for two, in the shade of the shutter, looking down through the open window at the river below.

Her face is half in the shade, half in the light; her hair dull dirty blonde and burnished golden.

She sings of her lover, as she sings of him every day, has sung of him every day since he left her. No-one hears her voice, as low in sound as it is in tone; but people passing by on the other side of the river look up and sigh, because, they say, it is a shame for one so beautiful to be so sorrowful.

A child with yellow hair: they remember a sunny-faced child of seven or eight, playing with the blown brown leaves in the dust of the square; a girl with a curiously strong square face, and water-blue eyes that were always wide with openness to whatever of the world they saw. Such a child, they said, will know great sorrow, for there will be nothing those eyes will not see, and nothing that heart will not feel. Great joy, of course, for who could imagine otherwise for such a pretty child; but all the sorrow of the world also.

And so it was, and so it is, and Françoise sits in her window as she had for far more than the traditional year and a day; sits, and sings of her love, for in singing she will keep her love with her, though he is far away.

On the wall above her bed, just by where the slatted light makes patterns on the wall, is a painting that few have seen in recent years, and none save Françoise for quite a while — not, indeed, since her lover left her to sing of him.

It is a painting of a town, a small town whose people wander without purpose by the wharf on the riverbank; who sit drowsily outside the café with their jus d'orange and bitter café noir, their vins rouges and their demis de bière. A child leads a bored Labrador between the legs of

the tables and of the patrons; a toothless woman sits on the ground, fanning herself in the mid-day heat. Above all is the church clock tower with, near its top, a jagged circular hole in the canvas.

Françoise moves her small bench a few handsbreath; she closes one shutter and opens the other as the slatted light moves across the painting, across the wall, the bed, the floor. She sits again, and as she begins to sing again, her hand clenches the small pocket watch which hangs on a chain pinned to her white dress, by her right breast.

They had found it in an antiques shop a few days before he left her, and he had bought it for her, promising he would have it repaired; the hands stand still at half past one. It is the only thing she has that he had given her.

Charles considered hiring a boat, if there were one to be hired, and rowing down the river. But it seemed that only the huge bright blue-green dragonflies were moving above the still water, and even they, drugged by the sun, moved little faster than the few men still on the bank.

He turned and walked slowly up the cobbled road into the town. Only the church, he thought, made a town of these few poor houses, a blacksmith's, a front room store, and a single café.

He bought a demi and found a table in a small patch of shade outside the café.

"Bonjour m'sieu."

He shook the outstretch hand. "Bonjour!"

"You are well?"

Charles shrugged. "The heat. . ."

"Ah oui, it is hot." His companion grinned, showing a few broad yellow teeth, their roots exposed in the gums.

They sat in silence as the sun hung over head. Charles sipped his beer slowly; the heat made him drowsy more than thirsty. Maybe later, he thought, I shall look around this town; later, when it is cooler.

There were seven or eight people outside the café; maybe the same inside; three or four more down by the river. A dog came by, sniffed his trouser leg, and moved on to another table.

Charles beckoned to the waiter and ordered another

demi; he would not move for a while, not until the sun moved on a little in the sky.

Two men came up from the river. They paused by the café to greet friends, then went up the road a few more yards to sit on a bench against the wall of a house. A lizard which had been in the sun in front of the bench moved unhurriedly out of their way. One of the men produced two bottles of beer from a small bag; the other broke in half the loaf of bread he had been carrying; they exchanged food and drink.

The waiter stood in the doorway of his café and looked disapprovingly at the two men; Charles guessed that they rarely had lunch at the café.

He caught the eye of the waiter, who brought him another demi.

The sun, overhead, was too bright for his eyes, which were half closed.

The man at his table seemed to have fallen asleep. Charles sipped at his beer slowly; it was refreshing, but in the heat he knew it would make his head ache.

When he had ordered, and drunk as slowly as before his fourth demi, he stood, leaving some coins on the table. The sun beat down on the top of his head as he walked up the cobbled road towards the church.

Here, at least, it was cool inside. Charles stood at the back, looking up at the altarpiece at the east end. The reredos, a bas-relief illustrating some Gospel story, was over-ornate, its expensive gilding looking cheap in its profusion. Above it, reaching up and obscuring much of the east window, was a piece of marble statuary. Charles stepped closer to examine it.

To the left, an old man, calipers in his heavily veined hand, was measuring the world; and flying up from the world towards the right was time's winged Chariot. Charles stood at the chancel steps for many long minutes, then turned, and was startled by the huge rose window above the west doors where he had entered the church.

Once this town was larger, he thought; or the local comte had wished to smooth his way to heaven.

Savouring the cool, Charles took his time wandering around the church, examining each stained glass window, each side chapel, each statue of the Virgin or of an unknown saint. He sat for a while in a pew, and let his thoughts drift. Eventually he stood, and left through the small leather covered door by the great west doors.

The heat of the sun, directly overhead, smote him and caused him to sway. His eyes shut tight against the burning light, he caught hold of a pillar by the porch to steady himself, and thought he heard a woman's voice, quiet and low, from a long distance, singing his name. He looked around and up, and saw for the first time that the church tower beside the entrance was missing its clock. It was from the circular hole in the masonry that the voice seemed to come.

Sun-dazed, he made his way down the cobbled road to the café. The old man still dozed at his table.

The sun has moved around and down, and Françoise sits in its gentler light, her hand on the small watch at her breast. As she sings, she gazes down at the green water that separates her small island, l'île Fisseau, from the town around it. A slight sound causes her to look up: a middle-aged woman in a pale blue head scarf has opened

the shutters of an upstairs room in her house on the bank, and is shaking a mat out of the window. She sees Françoise sitting in her own window, and smiles a greeting.

An old man in a collarless shirt cycles along the road that leads to the little ironwork bridge to the island; two loaves of bread stick out from the basket on his handlebars. He sees Françoise, and waves.

She sees her neighbours and other townsfolk, but gives no sign of seeing them. There are a thousand shades of green outside her window, the different greens of leaves of different ages, some shaded, some limned with light, of ash and rowanberry and horse chestnut; the greens of the river, and the reflections of trees and bushes in it, and the rusted green by the little landing stage below the large white house across from her; the dark green paint of the shutters as the woman, her mats shaken, closes them again against the late afternoon light.

Françoise turns her head and looks at the painting on her wall; it had been there all her life, and for long before; scratched and marked and torn canvas over wood, set in a frame whose mouldings match those around the ceiling and the fireplace and the door, and fixed into the wall. Many times as a child she told herself stories to the town in the painting, of the little wharf on the riverbank, of the cobbled street leading up to the café, of the church, far too big for the few houses and their people, and of its tower.

"Papa, how did the church tower lose its clock?" she would ask, and he would say "You tell me," and she would.

She is looking at the church and its tower as she sings for her love, for her love also loved this painting, and wondered about it, and maybe told himself stories about it, for she did not tell him hers, for they were from her childhood.

Françoise has no stories now. She sits, and she sings of her lost love, and waits for the time when she will find him again.

Charles drank a small, bitter café noir, and then a grand cfeme, making each of them last. His head was beginning to throb from the heat and his earlier beer. He glanced up at the eggshell blue sky, and saw the sun directly overhead; it must be about one, he thought, maybe half past. He never carried a watch; despite this, or perhaps because of it, he always knew the time to within half an hour.

He paid for his coffees, and wandered slowly down to the wharf. A couple of men sat in the slight shade of a rowing boat propped on its side. The boat was part filthy white and part new blue, and a pot of paint stood to one side. The men seemed to be asleep.

Charles looked around. The only other boat was upturned; a large hole in its bottom appeared half-way repaired.

He sat on the top step of a small flight of stone steps going down into the river, leaning against a stone bollard to one side, and watched the brightly coloured dragonflies skimming slowly over the water. It was too hot even for them.

The glare of the still water hurt his eyes; he closed them. In the mid-day heat, he was soon asleep.

He dreamt of a golden-haired lady in a long white dress; she was sitting by a part-shuttered window, singing softly. He tried to hear her words, knowing they were important; but she was singing too softly.

He awoke stiff and sore; his left arm had pins and needles, and his neck ached; his head had been twisted sideways to rest against the bollard. He stood up carefully and gently stretched the pains out of his body. His mouth tasted foul; he needed a coffee to clean his mouth and revive him.

What had he been dreaming of? Something very familiar, but... no, it had gone.

He walked up the cobbled road to the café, the sun, directly above, burning down on him.

The dream haunted him as he sat, sipping slowly at his café noir. There had been someone, a person, but he could not think who it had been. And there had been music, he was sure; a song. Someone had been singing a song. But who, and where, and why? And why was it so important for him to know?

Charles was puzzled, and this somehow made him hungry. He ordered a croque monsieur and a jus d'orange from the waiter, and sat deep in thought until they arrived. A song, and a singer. But who?

He ate slowly, abstractedly; the food was cold before he was half finished. Finally he pushed the empty plate to one side, and reached for the jus. The cool drink refreshed him a little, but the sun was high in the sky and the heat and brightness made him feel sluggish.

"Bonjour, monsieur." The man with large yellow teeth had woken. He grinned as he held his hand out, and Charles noticed thickened saliva caked around his teeth and the corners of his mouth.

"Bonjour. Did you sleep well?"

"Ah, so-so. But now I am hungry. Marcel!"

The waiter appeared. Charles, knowing that his companion would talk while he ate, spraying him with half-chewed food, paid his bill and left.

He walked up the cobbled hill to the church, and sat for a while on a stone bench in the cool porch, getting his breath back from walking in the mid-day sun. A memory drifted by; he reached out for it, but it was gone.

He stood up, meaning to go into the church, but instead he stepped out of the porch and stood in the blazing sun.

"Charles..."

"...Charles..."

"...Charles..."

The voice was soft, and low, and loving, and sad. It was the sound of lonely tears.

He looked around but could see no-one.

"...Charles..."

He looked up, and saw the hole in the church tower, where the clock should be.

"Charles..."

Now that he knew its source, the voice was clearer, nearer, a little louder. And now, though he still could not remember the detail, the person, he recalled his dream, and the sweet low voice singing to him.

The door at the foot of the tower was unlocked. Charles pushed it open, and climbed up the stairs.

It is evening, and Françoise is preparing for bed. She has

locked the shutters and lit the candles; she has brushed her teeth and her hair. Now she kneels by her bed, not to pray the prayers she learnt from the nuns as a child, but to say his name, over and over, "Charles, Charles, Charles, Charles..." while she presses his gift to her breast.

And she hears his voice, that she not heard for so long, calling "I'm here, I'm here, Where are you?" She hears his voice, but does not believe it, does not dare believe it.

"Charles," she whispers.

"Yes, yes, I am here."

"Charles!" She leaps up, spins around, expecting to fall into his arms, his arms that will hold her and hug her and... he is not there; there is no-one there.

She falls to the floor, burying her face in the counterpane on her bed, sobbing uncontrollably.

"Don't cry, my love. Please, don't cry. I'm here. It's all right."

But the heart-wrenching sound of her sobs filled the room near the top of the tower and would not stop. Charles looked around despairingly. The mid-day sun streamed through the great circular hole in the wall, lighting every corner of the room, brightening the cobwebs, illuminating the piles of old prayer books. He was alone in the room, alone with the sound of her sobbing.

He moved to the hole in the wall, stood facing out through it.

"Françoise, I remember. I remember, now, how I came here,"

"No, no, no, he isn't here, I've lost him forever. Oh my love."

"Françoise, listen to me. Please listen to me. Come to the painting. Come right up to the painting."

"It is his voice, but he is not here. I am going mad with grief for my love."

The sun burning down on his head, Charles stepped into the hole itself, bracing himself on the rough stones at the sides. He called out from the hole, called out towards the blazing sun, "Françoise, Françoise, I love you."

The sound of sobbing changed; he could hear that she had raised her head.

"Françoise, listen. Stand on your bed in front of the painting."

He heard a rustling, then he could hear her breathing, ragged, her breath catching in her throat. His arms and legs braced in the hole in the church clock tower wall, he leaned forward, so that his face was out in the open, out in the fierce mid-day heat and light.

"Françoise."

Her bare feet are unsteady on the bed; the mattress seems to move beneath them. Her hands are either side of the painting, resting on the moulding around it.

"Charles, how did you..." She realises how silly this sounds, knows that she is imagining it all; but even in imagination, to hear his voice is what she has longed for. No matter that she be going mad, if in her madness she can be with him.

"Hold out your hand." It is his voice! "Reach into the picture, through the hole in the tower. If you can take my hand, you can pull me back through, back with you."

Françoise lets go of the moulding; with one hand she

holds his gift to her, the broken pocket watch, clutches it to her breast; with the other she reaches into the painting, reaches through the ragged hole and

he caught her hand, and he could see it now, firmly held in his own, her hand reaching from the air outside the tower.

For a moment they stayed thus, for a timeless time the moving present and the static past held together. And then her hand was pulling him, tugging him away from his braced position in the hole, pulling him out into the air, way above the ground, and he could see for a flickering second her candle-lit room, and felt himself begin to fall forward, outward from the tower, and panicked, and floundered on the brink of falling, and twisted himself around and flung himself back into the dusty room. . .

. . .and he is still holding her hand. They lie together, holding each other desperately, scared that they might lose each other again.

"How did I. . .?"

"Shh, my love, we're together."

"Yes, but where are we?" There is a tinge of fear in her voice.

"We're in the town in the painting." He sits up, and puts his arm around her shoulders. "I pulled you through the hole in the clock tower — Françoise! The hole — it's gone!"

He leaps to his feet, trips on a pile of books in the dimly-lit clock chamber, and stops, putting his hand up to touch the works of the clock, fixed firmly in the wall of the tower.

Some time later he leads Françoise down the staircase, and out of the doorway at the bottom.

It is still quite hot, but the sun is halfway down the sky, and down at the wharf men are working.

No-one has seen Françoise today, The woman in the house across the branch of the river, the people who pass by and smile or wave to the young white-dressed woman in her window; no-one has seen her today.

Although the sun hangs high in the sky, they stop on the street, in the burning heat, and ask "Have you seen Françoise today? It is strange; she is not at her window."

They find the woman who crosses the little ironwork bridge every day, who takes food in for Françoise and cleans the rooms which Françoise never uses in the large house; for Françoise is a woman of means, her father having left her not only the house, one of the finest in the town, but also substantial capital which provides a more than adequate income, a portion of which provides a more help who, when found, says "I only ever see her at her window, the same as you; she never comes out of her room, not when I'm in the house. And such a fine house too; I remember when her papa was alive and she but a bright young girl bouncing on his knee, Oh, the parties they had in that house!" So she was no help, but she had a key and would lead them in, those concerned and those simply curious.

For none save the daily help had been in Françoise's house since the day her young man left her; and what a time that had been, with Françoise running from room to room searching for him beneath every bed and inside

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every cupboard and behind every curtain and never finding him, until her worry became tears, and her tears became shrieks, and her shrieks eventually became tears again, and when the tears left her so did the neighbours and townsfolk who had been helping her but had been no help to her.

They had seen her every day since then, sitting at her window, but none had spoken to her since that day.

She was not in the kitchen when they came in the servants' door, nor was she (the curious needed no urging to search) in any other room. And so they came at length to her own room, and knocked and were not answered, and tried the door and found it locked, the key in its hole on the other side.

They knocked again, and were not answered, and some were for breaking the door open; then one of them, the town handyman, said "No need", and slid a paper through the gap under the door, and jiggled the end of the key with a length of wire until it fell to the ground, and was pulled through, and fitted into the lock from the outside, and the door was opened. And the room was empty.

Empty of Françoise, anyway. They looked beneath the bed and inside the cupboard and behind the curtain and she was not there. The shutters had been bolted shut before they opened them to light the room and their search, so she could not have climbed from the window.

They tapped the walls around the room, thinking there must be some other way out, but all the walls seemed solid stone beneath the plaster. They examined the ceiling and the floor for trapdoors, they pulled rugs to the side and tried to prise the floorboards, but all were firm.

They saw the little wooden stool she sat on by the window, they saw the bed she must sleep in at night, they even pulled back the covers, in case, in case.

And when they had looked, and searched, and stopped and wondered, and each had looked and searched again, convinced the others must have missed something, they left the room, not wanting to leave, not knowing where Françoise was gone.

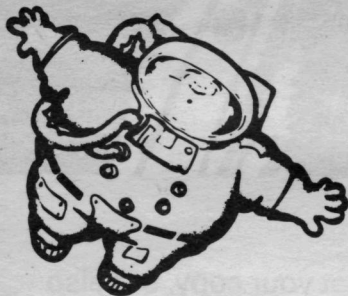
They left the shutters open, and the bright blazing mid-day sun shone through, leaving a trail of light across the floor, up and over the bed, and up the wall, where it fell full on the painting.

The last to leave looked around one last time, and her eye was caught by the sun-lit painting of the town, and the small dock on the riverbank, and the small ticking clock set in the church tower. She peered more closely to check the time.

"No, it must be wrong," she said to herself; "it can't be that time. It's only mid-day." And she glanced out of the window to make sure, and nodded to herself, for the sun hung still overhead.

David V. Barrett.

David Barrett reviews SF and Fantasy for the Independent, New Scientist, New Statesman and Society, Foundation and Fear as well as other publications. He edited Vector, the critical journal of the B.S.F.A. for four years. He is now special project editor on Computer Weekly and recently edited his first anthology Digital Dreams, (Published by NEL).



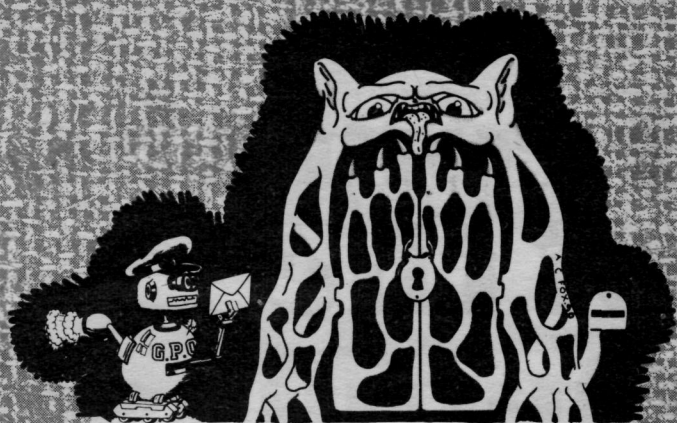
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The Gate Post Letters & News



Dear Editor,

Having heard tales of **The Gate's** demise, I was surprised to find myself in a position to buy issue 2, particularly as I never saw a copy of No. 1 anywhere. (it's still available from W Pub. Ed.) I am pleased to see it has re-emerged, because I feel that the more magazines there are the more opportunity there is for aspiring writers such as myself and the greater is the confidence and audience of *SF* in general.

Despite its thinness, I was pretty impressed with issue 2; I particularly enjoyed the stories by Dean Whitlock and the ever-intriguing Garry Kilworth, Kim Newman's would have been the best of the lot if it hadn't gone on so long. The only thing I was dubious about was the Artwork - perfectly good (and occasionally very good) though it was, none of it was relevant; so it served to distract rather than to enhance. Love the pic. on page 28 though.

Best wishes to **The Gate**
Peter Sidell

Dear Sir,

Without doubt the best story in issue 2 is 'The Smell of Cloves' by Dean Whitlock. It is nice to have a story of sadness end on a note of optimism. All too often lately short SF has been of a depressing nature. I'm afraid Garry Kilworth's 'Surfing Spanish Style' made no impression. Please don't bother with 'known' authors if they are going to palm off sub-standard material to you. The next story, 'Terminal Velocity', redeems the magazine. Chris Amies has found an highly original idea. The rest of the

stories are OK but will not set the world alight. Finally, can we have book reviews, SF is after all primarily a written medium.

Yours faithfully
Geoff Cane.

Dear The Gate,

In reply to Patrick Skelton's point raised in the last issue, I agree the use of 'good clear English' is to be encouraged, but he seems to imply this should override other considerations such as format, style and technique. I would disagree with that, believing that writers must feel free to experiment with their work. It may not always produce the best results, but if by doing so a writer can learn and mature, a greater good than remaining 'True to English' will have been done, that of allowing creativity to flourish.

Yours sincerely,
JON TOUT

BBR LAUNCH

A launch of the hitherto amateur magazine **BBR** into the full professional field has been announced by the Editor **CHRIS REED**. The next issue of **BBR** will be published on 4th March 1991. This will be issue 18 for **BBR**, and has an impressive line-up of writers. These include American, Richard Kadrey, David Hast and Mike O'Driscoll. Artwork will be by former **2000 AD** artist SMS, as well as Kevin Cullen and Andrew 'Dreyfus' Caines. Headlining this issue will be a new Jerry Cornelius story from Michael Moorcock. 'The Romanian Question' is Moorcock's first story in a British fiction magazine since **INTERZONE** No.1 in 1982.

FIFTEENTH ANNIVERSARY

Peterborough seems to be a hive of activity this year. In May the local SF Club are celebrating their fifteenth anniversary with a series of events. These include an Art exhibition, competitions and visits by such Authors as James Follet, Ian Watson and Freda Warrington amongst others.

Then in July a Convention is being held at the city's Moat House Hotel. Guests include David Gemmell and Adrian Cole.

More information on these and other events can be obtained by writing to:

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From the Annals of the Onomastic Society

Ian Watson

Melvin Twelves surveyed his audience there in the library of Hardley Hall, emitted a few throat-clearing coughs as if in imitation of Lady Hesseforth's poodle, and commenced.

"New names. *New names*," he said portentously. Picking up a phone book from a nearby bureau, he thumped it down on to the lectern.

"Ablitt, Abolins, Aburto, Aindow, Ainscough," he declaimed, then gripped both sides of the reading stand. If the fat, fussy fellow hadn't been dressed in a loudly-checked suit and mulberry bow tie — his notion of a posh lecturer — he would have resembled some vicar of old, invited to preach before Her Ladyship in her own home, and who had chosen for his text those interminable lists from *Chronicles* in the Bible. ("And the sons of Ram the firstborn of Jerahmeel were Maaz, and Jamin, and Eker..." Et cetera, et cetera).

Melvin riffed through the wafer-thin pages.

"Breukelman, Brevetor, Brimacombe, Bumpsteed!" he proclaimed. "Oh the endless wealth of names!"

Already several members of our society were eyeing him quizzically. The Reverend Pendlebury was pursing his thin lips as if detecting of parody of his own Sunday morning performances. Chubby Sally Wigton, who actually worked for Telecom, compiling the phone book, wore a frown.

"These particular examples might not truly be unusual names," allowed Melvin, "though I suspect they are, I suspect they are. My point, my thesis, is simple. And I think it is revolutionary."

Elegant, silver-haired Lady Hesseforth smiled tolerantly. She was wearing a powder-blue silk gown and a discreet diamond necklace. Generations of her kin had lived in Hardley Hall. She could chart her own ancestry back, with only a hiccup or two, via William the Conqueror to the seventh century. Compared with which, revolutions were such trivialities.

"The Spontaneous Emergence of Names," said our speaker. "There's my title, there's my theory. How come there are so many weird names in the world, as well as all the ordinary ones? New names must be emerging

spontaneously; that's how. Indeed I believe this is a key to the so-called population explosion —"

With a sinking feeling, and to avoid accusing eyes, I let my gaze rove round the library, taking in all those volumes bound in brown, golden, and red leather, or yellow calf; the rosewood furnishings and panelling, the red and gold Indian carpets, the gilt-framed ancestral portraits. Overwhelmingly this was a golden room, though some chairs were of black leather.

Mr Twelves proceeded to talk dross.

No, not dross, Lunacy would be the more rigorous description; eccentricity, a polite term.

"A new name sprouts — and bingo, here's another family on the scene. God, for want of a better name, is creating new persons complete with phoney backgrounds. Society swallows these new individuals as if they're real. Indeed, they *are* real; they firmly believe in themselves. Reality, my Lady, Ladies, and Gentlemen, is being adjusted to allow this situation —"

Haldane Smythe, one of our professional genealogists, had stuck up a hand in protest but the speaker ignored him.

"Twaites, Tweddle, Twemlow, *Twelves*: when you come across such a name, you're coming across someone who only came into existence recently, someone who is equipped with a whole false history which fits into the newest crack in reality. *Not*, I hasten to add, in such a way as will distort the major currents of history. For when did a Tweddle or a Bumpsteed or a Twelves ever feature in the history books? Such persons trickle into existence in the corners of the world, simply fattening out the population somewhat, enriching the host of names.

"I, my Lady, Ladies, and Gents, believe that *I* am such a person who has spontaneously emerged in the wake of my name. Let me explain my thesis in some detail —"

He twiddled his bow tie. This was Mr Twelves' hour of crackpot glory. I, God help me, had allowed it.

Lady Hesseforth inclined her head at me and winked. *Not to worry*. Well, maybe we should regard this occasion as a cabaret act, entertainment by a clown... Our lady

president and patron could be fun as well as generous. She wasn't notably prissy or snooty.

It's really incredible, the wrong assumptions some people will make.

"Onomastic", of course, means "pertaining to proper names". From the Greek, *onoma*. In the ranks of our Onomastic Society we numbered several genealogists, half a dozen amateur tracers of family trees, a topographer — who was interested in place names, from which family names so often derive. Then there were a linguist and a historian from the university, which is home to the Surnames Survey; some teachers, a couple of librarians (myself included), not to mention Jim Abbott who compiled computerised mailing lists, Harry Wise who supervised the electoral register at the council offices; and sundry other devotees of names. Principally, names of people: origin, meaning, distribution.

Melvin Twelves, a fairly recent recruit, worked in the town museum in a humble capacity.

As a group we weren't stuffy or threadbare. Thanks to Lady Hessleforth's sponsorship we didn't need to meet at some room in the College of Further Education, or the like. We hired a plush private suite in the Grand Hotel, conveniently close to a rather decent bar, where we would let our hair down somewhat afterwards.

Perhaps this touch of luxury led to misconceptions.

We'd chosen a name for our society which we thought had a certain eighteenth century cachet to it. During the first few months of our existence I was approached by one chap who was convinced we must be a gourmet dining club, dedicated to mastication.

Another well-heeled enquirer implied that we might perhaps be practitioners of — how shall I put it? — the sin of Onan in the Bible. Perhaps we were interested in masturb... no, I shall not write that word. Say rather: mutual bodily self-expression. This... connoisseur... appeared to envisage medically safe manual orgies in our hotel suite.

A young coin collector contacted me too; one of those treasure-hunting vandals equipped with a metal detector. Sorry lad, that's numismatism.

What we enjoyed once a month at the Grand were lectures followed by question time; and I should have thought that by now Melvin Twelves would have gleaned some of the fundamentals of the name-game. Apparently not.

Melvin Twelves was one of two enthusiasts who joined at our meeting back in April. The other was Mr Chang, who had learned of us through the Surnames Survey and contacted me beforehand, as did Twelves. I had taken to screening new recruits by means of a little interview, though this wasn't exactly out of forelock-tugging deference to Lady Hessleforth. Not at all. She laughed merrily when I related, in the bar, the stories of the coin collector, the gourmet, and yes, yes, even of the onanist who imagined he had discovered a sensual salon to suite his taste in safe but perhaps exhibitionist sex. (Naturally, I phrased this euphemistically.) No, I simply didn't wish our meetings to be disrupted by the ridiculous, any more than I would have wished to see Superman comics shelved next to Shelley. A secretary has duties.

So Melvin Twelves was under no misapprehension as

to what onomastic meant; his peculiarity only emerged subsequently.

Mr Chang, on the other hand, remained a bit of an enigma. Possessing a Chinese name, nevertheless he didn't look especially oriental. What race did he belong to, or what mixture of races? I really couldn't tell. His bland sallow face hinted at a medley of origins. When he spoke, his English was slightly slurred though verbally precise. Mr Chang claimed he was in exporting — though the exporting of what? And why should this lead him to the office of the Surnames Survey? He would sit silently in our meetings and would hardly chat much afterwards in the bar, where he only drank fruit juice; but he would smile benevolently. For a while I had him figured as someone who was waiting for our real purpose to announce itself — for us to produce a snuff-box of cocaine or whatever — as if all our talk of names was merely code. Before long I decided that he was simply lonely, shy, and enjoyed our company, so I mostly forgot about this witness in our midst...

Melvin was going his ends, linking everything possible together in true conspiracy-theory fashion.

"The eminent scientist Fred Hoyle has stated that atoms of hydrogen come into existence spontaneously in the depths of space — in a sufficient number to fill up the gaps as the universe expands. What's more, the whole original universe may have emerged out of nothing at all. This phenomenon is known as a vacuum fluctuation...

"The Creation Scientists in America explain that if God indeed made the world a few thousand years ago, He surely placed all those fossils in the rocks at the same time, so as to give the world a consistent history —"

I noticed Chase Daniels, our Mormon genealogist from Utah, nodding and wincing simultaneously. Probably wondered whether he was being satirized.

"God named things," said Melvin, "and those things duly appeared. *And God said, Let there be light; and there was light.* The word caused the event. Why shouldn't the creative force name new *people*? Why shouldn't these people appear like lots of hydrogen atoms — we're mostly water, aren't we? HO. Why shouldn't this force provide fossil memories and records to back up these new people? Obviously these people would possess rare, and weird-seeming names —"

Disgruntlement warred with waning courtesy on the faces of his audience. Lady Hessleforth, for her part, looked vastly amused, to my relief. Her Ladyship possessed a centuries-old pedigree. Well, everybody does! But, unlike her, the majority of people have no idea what it consists of. Whereas our Melvin was demonstrating remorselessly that he could claim no pedigree whatsoever; that he had sprouted up like a mushroom overnight... through a crack in reality.

It was Melvin who was cracked.

An orphan? Brought up by a succession of foster parents? Heavy feeling of alienation? Impaired sense of reality? No doubt! And now at last the stupendous rationalization by this cuckoo: he was *unique*.

As he took pains to explain, thousands of other people must fit into his category. However he, uniquely, had decided that individuals with odd names were being created out of nothing, along with their appellations.

Did Lady Hessleforth anticipate some such fiasco? It was her suggestion that for this special anniversary gathering at Hardley Hall our keynote speaker should be eager Melvin, a member with no obvious onomastic qualifications beyond his unusual name and his enthusiasm. How democratic this evening would be; more of a celebration.

Was Lady H. playing with us, laughing behind her slender, ageing hand?

All previous lectures at the Grand had been much more strictly onomastic. Though not without humour and brio! Have I said that Chase Daniels was assigned to the Surnames Survey from the Family History Library in Salt Lake City? Chase told us all about the massive project by the Genealogical Society of Utah to microfilm records of names worldwide. Parish records, crumbling Hindu shrine registers, elegant Chinese *fang-chih*, oral recitations by Pacific islanders and west African *griots*... He described the atom-bomb-proof granite vault in the Utah desert. He enlarged on the "extraction" of names, the auditing process, the baptisms of the dead by proxy in batches, the pressures from the Mormon "Maoists" who wished to save as many souls as possible as quickly as could be, lest their names and their souls were lost forever...

Our historian, Jack Brakespear, spoke about the ways in which new names were adopted in the past (and Melvin definitely could *not* have been listening). In Britain the Norman Conquest stimulated the use of hereditary surnames. Mainly these were borrowed from birthplaces or job descriptions or might be nicknames or even insults. Since most people were illiterate, such surnames soon mutated wildly. In Japan the Tokugawa Shoguns, in their amiable wisdom, prohibited any mere peasants from owning surnames for two hundred years on pain of swift decapitation by a samurai blade. After Commodore Perry had elbowed his way in, millions of farmers vigorously invented surnames at random, resulting in over a hundred thousand such, the biggest bonanza of any nation. From the 1780s or so European governments compelled Jews to adopt surnames rather than patronymics. Often wistfully, Jews took their new names from animals, towns, or nature. The first Mr Rosenblum probably lived in a dingy urban ghetto. That was Jack's spiel.

"But," explained Jane Chapman on a subsequent evening, "names also die out..."

Perhaps this was dodgy territory. Lady Alice Penelope Diana Hessleforth had presented his Lordship, now deceased, with two daughters but no son; her adolescent grandchildren did not bear the Hessleforth name.

The De Montfort Suite was richly curtained, with a peacock motif. The carpet was mock-Chinese, with dragons; the seating, upholstered in brown leather. On one wall hung a huge dingy oil painting of cows grazing in a water meadow while a thunderstorm brewed. A Swiss cheese plant did its Jack-and-the-beanstalk business from out of a terracotta urn. The atmosphere was more that of clubland than a conference room. Most of us nursed a glass of something sustaining.

"By 1974," said portly, tweed-clad Jane, "the American Social Security rolls listed one and a quarter million different names. Yet of this wealth, nearly half a million

were held by single individuals!" Her glossy black hair was tied in a bun. Like a beautiful barge was she, to coin a phrase.

"People marry — and a name dies out." (Her Ladyship fanned herself.) "Or else people fail to marry, with the same result. But the principal mechanism for extinction is known as *pedigree collapse*..."

"Every pedigree is shaped like a diamond. Going back in time, this expands to embrace thousands of individuals. However, more and more common ancestors crop up on the different lines of descent, for the simple reason that cousins close or distant mate; I mean, marry. Thus the pedigree narrows again..."

"These diamonds move through history, overlapping and fusing, merging. Why, if one single nomad from Asia visited Africa in the ninth century, today every Chinaman must be closer than fiftieth cousin to every living African!"

Providing that said nomad had mated.

It must have been round about this time (not the ninth century but during Jane's lecture) that Melvin, quite disregarding the creativity of Jews and Japanese and British peasants, conceived or misconceived his theory about the spontaneous emergence of names.

I spotted Lady H. speaking democratically to Melvin afterwards in the bar. At the next month's meeting she made her hospitable offer regarding our up-coming anniversary; and Melvin's eyes lit up. With, I now thought in retrospect, the light of lunacy.

I had arrived at Hardley Hall in my old green Volkswagen, giving a lift to Chase Daniels. A solo Mr Chang was paying off a taxi as we drove up. Also arriving, chauffeuring a beaming Melvin, was Lady Hessleforth's Jaguar. Guest of Honour treatment indeed; Lady H. was gracious. The gravel forecourt already housed half a dozen vehicles belonging to our members. The August sun was painting clouds as it sank slowly, gilding parkland, casting long shadows from oak trees.

In spite of its name Hardley Hall had nothing scanty about it. An original quadrangular medieval manor had grown into a Tudor, then a Georgian mansion. The east wing edged against a lake. To the rear, lawn and topiary gardens led to an adventure playground and nature walk. The converted stable block was home to a vintage bicycle museum and tea rooms. Ten miles from the city, Hardley Hall was open to the public, and even hosted hoverboat championships attracting competitors from as far away as Sweden.

Lady H. hadn't exactly fallen on hard times. The surrender of a single Rembrandt had settled the death duties when her husband died. Simply, any stately home in its right mind soaked the admiring public for all it was worth. A modern version of peasant tithes, perhaps!

Inside, was opulence: oil paintings, tapestries, marble staircases, a great hall with hammer-beams of sweet chestnut, chinoiserie mirrors, ormolu candelabra... and a butler, Rogers, waiting with a tray of sherries. A white poodle yapped at us.

"Gosh," said Melvin, ignoring the dog. He wasn't so overwhelmed that he wasn't gearing up to overwhelm us.

"Gee," agreed Chase. "Reeks of history, right?" Mr Chang smiled faintly, and indicated the great



chandelier illuminating the entrance hall. A hundred diamond-shaped lustres sparkled in concentric skirts of crystal.

I remembered Lady H. relating how Hardley Hall had been electrified back in the 1890s. Essential to replace the oil lamps and candles, but the then-Lord was loath to rip up fine floorboards. So therefore...

"He bored holes at either end of each room." Her voice had tinkled when she told the tale. "He tied flex to the collar of a ferret, and popped it down one hole. A groom placed a piece of rotting rabbit by the far hole — and hey presto, we were wired up so quickly."

Had I detected a subtle callousness in this anecdote? Did she view our earnest study of names and lineages as an equivalent to the gawping of the unaristocratic crowds at art works and furnishings which they could not possibly possess, yet which their ticket money helped subsidize?

"The separate pedigree diamonds dangle down," said Mr Chang. "Yet the same electricity unites them into one incandescent mass."

Was this some foreign proverb? If so, it hardly made sense, since numerous light bulbs were mounted in the array, nor did the lustres melt together.

"So many different diamonds," said Chang, "and all the same."

Well, that was true enough, otherwise the chandelier would have looked a right mess. His revised proverb made rather more sense, but what was he driving at?

"Thus," concluded Melvin in the golden library, "I am what I am." How philosophical. But was this the

philosophy of Wittgenstein — or Popeye? Or Sartre — or Loony Tunes?

"I have no pre-cedents." He grinned daftly, perspiring. "I am unprecedented. How many more are there like me, filling up the world with their new names?"

So at last he ended his crazy speech and sat down, expecting applause.

Lady H. obliged, which obliged me likewise. Many felt under no obligation. Jack Brakespear looked furious. Chase sad, Haldane Smythe disgusted.

Then Mr Chang rose to his feet; he who had never so much as raised his hand before to ask a question.

"I have a statement to make, Your Ladyship, my friends... With respect, Mr Twelves is not only wrong. He is so far wrong that you can hardly imagine how wrong."

"Oh no?" called out Jane Chapman, eyebrows hoisted.

Mr Chang eyed her. "Mrs Chapman, you once spoke on the subject of names dying out... the pedigree diamond, marriage of cousins, the inter-relatedness of everyone on Earth. Names are doomed to die out faster than any new names are coined. All diamonds will converge — just as the races of humankind will converge physically. Only one surname will survive; which of course will be Chinese."

"Eh?" from Jim Abbott.

"Why Chinese? Even now there are a billion Chinese people — a sixth of the world's population or so — and they only share a meagre five hundred surnames between them. Ultimately these surnames must swamp all other surnames, and then drown one another — until the last Miss Wu weds a Mister Chang, and everyone on Earth is named Chang for ever and ever."

"Come off it," growled Harry Wise. Oh he'd be mindful of the same name repeated thousands of times. "I thought *marriage* was supposedly becoming obsolete? More and more people keep their own names these days, don't they? Specially in America, hmm?" He glanced at Chase — who fidgeted. What price the future of the geneology project and the salvation of unique souls under Chang's scenario?

"Children of any union generally only bear *one* surname," said Chang. "If they do take a double-surname, this process of hyphenation can hardly be extended to their own offspring without absurdity. Thus fashions in marriage make no difference."

First, Melvin had told us that he was spontaneously created from out of a void. Now Mr Chang claimed to possess the only name in the world — of the future. Lady H. looked bemused. She couldn't possibly be responsible for this new twist of the screw of buffoonery.

"The history of a thousand years is as nothing at all," Chang went on. "Nor the history of a thousand generations, either. Think of a quarter of a million years, think of a million generations."

Lady H.'s eyes hardened. How could a thousand and more years of proven pedigree be swept away so glibly?

"Why Chang?" Her voice was brittle. "Why your very own name *Mister Chang*?"

Because, Your Ladyship, I come from that future a quarter of a million years ahead. I am from the *mono-onomastic* society where everyone is a Chang. There's no one who isn't Chang. We are the Chang Race, we are Changkind!"

"Whatever next?" sneered Jane.

"Preposterous!" cried Jack.

However, others seemed inclined to play along with this latest foible. Oddly, after Melvin's parody this afforded some relief.

"Does everyone look exactly like you?" asked Sally merrily.

Chang pivoted. "No, there are still variations: of size, of hue, of body type. We are not all clones of one Chang, be clear about that. We are as various as the cows in a herd. Ask any of your farmers on that score! We are Mary Chang and Abdul Chang and Heinrich Chang and Yukio Chang and Natasha Chang. A world of ten billion Changs. Ten thousand million."

"I guess you needed a vacation," joked Chase.

"You have a mission, Mr Daniels. So do I." Chang patted the pockets of his suit. "I came back in time to gather a million true surnames. For yours is the epoch where the diamond of names is widest. I have these names now on microleaves." (*What were they?*) On my return I shall liberate these names. We will rename ourselves. We shall be free from the psychosocial uniformity of Chang. The mono-onomastic society will fracture fruitfully —

"Hang on a minute," protested Harry. "Why didn't all you Changs merely consult past records? Archives? Registers?"

"Old phone books?" suggested Sally. "Though maybe you don't use phones..."

"Old mailing lists?" chipped in Jim Abbott, getting into the spirit.

"Cultures rise and fall," Chang told them. "Data buries

data. Records are lost, erased, obliterated. I speak of a quarter of a million years. Nothing survives from your time: no pyramids, no Parthenon, no works of Plato or Shakespeare, no memory of your days, no history. I have plunged far into the past to find this hoard of names."

Jim asked, "I suppose you'll be taking the works of the Bard home with you too?"

Chang shook his head. "All his references are incomprehensible in my time. I take names, only names."

"But *you* can understand Shakespeare."

"No one else would, in my world. After long and special psychological preparation, I have been able to assimilate amongst you. And I thank you for your hospitality, one and all. Ladies. Gentlemen. And Lady Hesseforth." He sketched a bow, then moved towards the French windows. Outside, the lawn had grown grey with dusk.

I had been watching Lady H. from the corner of my eye all this while. Affronted surprise had given way to amusement, then to something resembling shock.

"Wait," she quavered, "is my name one of those you are taking home?"

Chang grinned. "Perhaps."

"Seems a whole lot of trouble to go to," said Jim. "If it's new names you want, why not just invent a barrelful? Make 'em up?"

"Not the same," said Chang. "No pedigree."

High time to conclude this farce. I stood and clapped for attention. "Friends, friends, Your Ladyship, members of the Onomastic Society: this has been a wonderful charade. It's All Fools Day in August. It's Hallowe'en. It's masquerade time. But really... nobody can travel quarter of a million years through time — any more," and I directed a cautionary glare at the wilted Melvin, "than they can pop into existence from out of nowhere. So let us laugh, and call this little carnival to a close. Well done, Mr Chang! Well done, Mr Twelves. At our next meeting in the Royal on September Sixteenth we shall have the pleasure of a visit by William Monkton, author of the acclaimed *French Nicknames* —"

Chang opened the French windows on to the stone-flagged terrace. A flight of steps led down to the glooming well-shaved grass. Illumination from the library diffused so far, no further. He crossed that terrace, descended those steps, walked out across the darkening turf... and vanished.

Surely he had simply put on a spurt of awesome speed and sprinted off into the topiary, which hid the adventure playground beyond...

He would have needed to streak like the fastest greyhound ever, to flit like a hummingbird, one moment there, one moment gone.

"Bloody well disappeared into thin air, he did," said Sally. "I swear it. Pardon my language."

Nearly all of us had crowded to the open windows.

"He's gotta be out there," said Chase.

"Manifestly he *isn't*," said Lady H.

"Hiding in the hedges," I suggested.

"You know that he couldn't possibly have reached them."

Who was I to argue with Her Ladyship?

"What Mr Chang said... it was *true*," marvelled Sally.

"It was all *true*." A chorus.

To his credit, our Melvin took this up-staging in his stride. Maybe the derision which greeted his own performance had finally sunk in.

"I suspected him all along," said he. "And I jolly well flushed him out, didn't I? Chang just couldn't resist contradicting me."

Lady H. relapsed into the nearest seat. She surveyed the gilded portraits of her ancestors, and murmured: "Did he really take my name with him?"

Melvin bustled to her and vulgarly patted her slim, well-bred hand.

"I'm sure he did, Your Ladyship. I'm sure he took all our names. Hesseleforth, Twelves, Brakespear... They'll all spontaneously emerge quarter of a million years in the future. Fair's fair. Only right and proper. There'll be, ooh —" he was performing a computation in his head: ten British billions divided by one million — "there'll be ten thousand Hesseleforths scattered across that future globe, in Europe, in Africa, in Asia —"

Lady H. shuddered. Ashen, she jerked her hand away.

"That isn't *pedigree*, Mr Twelves. Don't you understand anything? I was asking Mr Chang because I *didn't* wish my name to be... taken... in vain!"

Fearing for the future funding of our meetings at the Grand, I hastened to raise my sherry glass in which a few drops remained.

"On this anniversary, may I propose a toast? To the Onomastic Society!"

Lady H. fixed me with a beady stare.

"Which one? Ours — or theirs?" However, she

gestured for the decanter which Rogers had left on a rosewood writing desk. Melvin hurriedly obliged. Lady H. needed that sherry to steady her nerves.

She drank. We all drank. A bond was re-affirmed; a promise renewed.

When we foregathered in the De Montfort Suite a month later, Her Ladyship was present as usual. And so our society listened to Mr Monkton discoursing upon French nickers. *Nicknames*, damn it. *Nicknames*. *Sobriquets* not *soubrettes*. Lady Alice Penelope Diana wore an attentive smile throughout.

I always say there's resilience in the old blood.

Ian Watson

Ian Watson's short stories have been published in most of the major SF magazines from his first "Roof Garden Under Saturn" in *New Worlds* in 1969 to "Stalin's Teardrops" in this winter's *Weird Tales*. His output of novels include SF, Fantasy and recently Horror. He lives in a quiet Northamptonshire village.

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“The Scar”

Paul Beardsley

“Unnatural!” said Lawrence Templeton, emerging from the en-suite bathroom clad in a lilac bathrobe, “I tell you it’s unnatural!”

“It’s perfectly safe!” assured his concu-sec, Sally Williams. “And the company is paying.”

“Why can’t I go by plane? Better still, why couldn’t they send Matthews?”

“It has to be you, and you’re too valuable to risk. A class one executive flying over the Atlantic? It’s unthinkable!” She shuddered theatrically.

“I think it’s pretty unthinkable to have my atoms scattered across the Atlantic, or anywhere else. What if they can’t put them back together?”

“It doesn’t work like that,” she explained patiently. “The transmitter booth simply sends information of what you are like — every last detail of your body and all your memories up to the moment of transfer.”

“Then it’s just a copy of me that arrives at the other end!”

“That’s an academic point. In normal circumstances, every atom in your body is replaced over the course of a year. The teleport booth simply speeds up the process.”

“But what about the body in the transmitter booth?”

Sally shrugged. “The process of reading the memories simultaneously causes them to be erased in the original body, which is then harmlessly destroyed.”

“I still don’t like it,” he said. “Call me a luddite, but it just feels wrong.”

“There’s another point to consider.” Sally slipped her hand into his bathrobe and ran her finger down the scar on his left pectoral. “The information on your body is gleaned from a single cell. The body created in the receiver booth is effectively an instant clone.”

“So what?”

“You asked earlier why they couldn’t send Matthews. Rumour has it he was born ugly. Surgery put that right, of course, but not on a genetic level.”

“So a cloned Mathews would be an ugly Mathews?”

“Precisely.”

“Hmm,” mused Lawrence. “Mathews ugly. Mathews who ‘needed’ an extra concu-sec because he had so much

paperwork. . .”

“A clone of you, on the other hand,” continued Sally, “would not have a scarred chest.”

“You know, Sally, I think I’m beginning to like the sound of this trip.” He had always hated the scar, a relic of pre-memory childhood, of his unremembered parents who must have been brutal or negligent.

“Beauty is only skin deep,” said Sally.

“I couldn’t have put it better myself,” Lawrence said cheerfully, and switched on the bed.

“Would you like your clothes sent on, sir?”

“Don’t they,” he realised it was a stupid question but continued anyway, “come with me?”

“No sir. Your memories will arrive in a cloned body clothed in an arrival gown provided by TransPort International.”

“I don’t come dripping out of a hi-tech womb then?”

The girl smiled her professionally patronising smile. “No sir. It really is very civilised. Would you step this way?”

“A lamb to the slaughter,” he muttered.

“If you would like theological or philosophical counselling before your trip, TransPort International provide an excellent ser. . .”

“No. No really, I think it’s something I’ll have to sort out for myself.”

“As you wish sir.”

He followed the girl down the corridor and into the teleport chamber. A small group of bald, nailless people in arrival gowns passed by, in wheelchairs or walking with assistance, and as Lawrence fought the urge to ask how it felt, he was led to his allotted booth.

I’m never going to come out of there, he thought. I’m going to die. “I would like my clothes sent on,” he said, playing for time.

“Sir, it is not unusual for customers to feel nervous at this stage. TransPort International provide a service for such occasions.”

He took the proffered capsule and swallowed it.

He stepped into the glass booth and the curtains closed

around him. They were a very tasteful midnight blue. A seat was provided; he sat, and felt relaxed. The memory scan settled unobtrusively on his head.

Poor old Matthews! Still, it's not just anyone who can use these things.

Muzak played. A clock counted down from ten seconds.

Down to zero. It was like falling asleep — Into a nightmare, the ultimate invasion of privacy, to know that someone is aware of your dirtiest, most secret thoughts and is laughing at them.

"Someone else is in the booth!"

The door would not open for another ten seconds. Ten seconds with. . .

The trauma hit and Lawrence collapsed.

He awoke in a bed, blindfolded and restrained. Through a drugged numbness, he was dimly aware of something else, something very wrong. . .

I must have been redirected, he thought. I've been captured by a rival company.

Someone was breathing over him. Hiding the nervousness in his voice, Lawrence demanded, "Who are you, and what's going on here?"

"Ah, Mr Templeton, you're awake!"

"Who are you" he repeated.

"I'm Dr Ford of ExecuHealth. I'm afraid there's been a terrible mistake."

This should have sounded reassuring — a rival company would not have bothered with lies or apologies, they'd have started him straight away. But the sense of

wrongness was still present, if anything more so than before.

"What kind of mistake?"

In the brief pause that followed his question, Lawrence suddenly realised that the doctor was standing some distance away, yet he could still feel breath on his face.

"A replication problem. A complication in the building blocks." Ford struggled to mix layman's talk with euphemism. "The receiver booth produced a copy of you as you would have grown up normally, but. . ."

"But what?" *Who's breathing on me?* he wanted to shout. *A nurse?*

ExecuHealth employing a human nurse? Impossibly unethical!

"But with unforeseen results," Ford continued.

"What unforeseen results?"

"Mr Templeton, I have to inform you that you were born as one of a pair of siamese twins."

It took a few seconds for it to sink in that this must be a joke. Yes, a joke, Matthews must have been behind it, and he was damned if he wasn't going to give the appearance of taking it well.

So why was he so scared? Feeling was gradually returning and he was distantly aware of something, someone, attached. And still the breathing.

"This event is in itself very significant, as it was not formerly believed that the condition was genetic in. . ."

"Goddammit what is *really* going on?"

"I'm afraid you're going to have to see it for yourself. Nurse, remove his blindfold."

The robot complied, and for the second time that day,



Lawrence Templeton fainted.

"I acknowledge the reality of the situation," Lawrence said, much later, furtively glancing at his other half. "Now, what's to be done?"

"We are a civilised society," said Ford. "As such, we recognise that in some instances it is possible for quality of life to take precedence over life itself."

"You mean you can separate us, but one will die?"

"Yes."

Lawrence gave that some thought, A second later, he said, "Very well, that's how it must be."

"I admire your decision," said the doctor. "It was your brother's decision also."

"What do you mean?"

The doctor's brows furrowed. "I thought you understood. When you — both — arrived in the receiver booth, the booth was faced with two brains but only one set of memories."

"So?"

"So it played the memories into both brains. It is intolerable for two people with the same memories to

stay conscious at the same time, so you initially fainted, and subsequent to that we've kept one or the other of you in an induced coma."

"So let me get this straight, Doctor. This... brother of mine thinks he's me, right?"

"Not quite, Mr Templeton," and for the first time Lawrence realised that the left side of his chest was quite free from any blemish.

Paul Beardsley

Paul Beardsley was born in Nottingham in 1963, and now lives in Mavant. He received a B.A. degree in 1986. He has had a story published in Ad Lib magazine and in Digital Dreams published by NEL, as well as contributing material to Viz

HARLAN ELLISON'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE ENDING OF THE VIETNAM WAR

I'd like to speak of Ellison
Who may very well eat Venison
But he's a man after my own heart
And when the Vietnam war did start
He will not have been very old
But during that war he was brave and bold
For he distributed propaganda
And if he saw you he would hand you
A leaflet or something saying nay,
Now that the Vietnam war has gone away
And who's to say that men like he
Didn't cause it to stop, to cease to be
For I believe that dissidents
Are really the ones who wear the pants.

John Binns

Please Sir, can we kill something?

David Redd

That night everyone was excited in the Number Three dorm of Education Unit 293 (male). Even after lights-out all the Third Form boys kept whispering about their plans for tomorrow. Inevitably, the giant telescreen lit up with a message:

ESPECIALLY YOU, SMITH MINOR!

Juvenile sniggering rippled round the dorm. Smith minor had been put in the caning machine for two nights running already. His little chums all hoped he would be given a third dose tonight. Some of them had placed bets on it. And indeed the ceiling hoist swooped down on his capsule, lifted it, and slid across the dorm to the hatch marked CM. Muffled whacks sounded. Then his capsule returned, and all was silent.

The Third Formers drifted off to sleep, lulled by the standby glow of the telescreen and by the faint moaning from Smith minor.

Meanwhile Chalky was still awake in his study, recharging his batteries for the day ahead, and reviewing his lecture inputs from Database Central. His bald head shone like the polished chromium it was, his optic sensors were augmented by thick auxiliary lenses, and his stainless steel heart had the traditional read-only programs for Discipline and Child Control. Chalky, in fact, was a perfect old-fashioned schoolmaster of the kind they didn't make any more.

Chalky had been one of the first teaching robots to be built, right after the War of Human Self-Annihilation. New human children had been cloned successfully from the tissue samples in the automatic hospitals, but the robot then had the problem of training the young humans for adult life. All the training manuals had been destroyed in the war. Chalky and the other teaching robots had been programmed with the few educational records that could be unearthed from the ruins. Much useful data had been gained from a text called "Billy Bunter of Greyfriars School" and from similar fragments. (The most complete surviving text, "The Naughtiest Girl Is A Monitor," still defied logical analysis.) And so the robots were doing their best for the children. Chalky in

particular dedicated himself to the upbringing of his boys. That was why he was working late tonight, ensuring that his batteries were fully charged and that his memory banks were well stocked for the annual Nature Ramble.

Tomorrow he would take the Third Form outside the dome. It would be the first time that this group of boys had ever left their Unit.

The lights grew bright with morning. The boys awoke.

At first the Third Formers went through their usual morning routine of exercising, washing, and having clothes assembled around them. However, the thought of their trip outside seemed to affect their self-control. The Thirds worked themselves up into such a state of excitement that at brekkers-time they displayed an unusual degree of silliness. Figgins spread marmalade onto his tie. Lawson clenched his fist so dramatically, demonstrating his eagerness for the Nature Ramble, that he knocked his glass of milk right across the refectory table. Fatty Manners ate his own porridge first and then two other fellows' porridge as well, instead of the other way round. (Figgins, meanwhile, was eating his tie and remarking, "This toast seems rather soft.") But eventually they all calmed down somewhat and filed out towards Big School, leaving the refectory decidedly the worse for wear.

The cleaning robots came in, scanned the mess and shook their antennae at each other sadly.

"The young masters were lively this morning, X-49F"

"They certainly were, Z-92Q. I hope Mr Chalk can keep them in hand today. He'll have his work cut out with them, you mark my words!"

And X-49F began vacuuming the spilt porridge into the recycler.

In Big School, all the pupils of the Unit were standing to attention during Morning Assembly.

It was a simple service. There was a hymn about learning and growing, ending with a rousing chorus which went

So we claim our des-tin-ee
Rule the Earth with mast-ter-ee!

A noble sentiment indeed. Then there were a few short prayers, mostly for the continued good functioning of Environmental Maintenance, and a birthday cheer for the Maxwell sextuple-clones. After that came the announcements. A sporting fixture for the Fifth Form skateball team, a mock examination for the Sixth, and the eagerly-awaited Nature Ramble for the Third. Then all the boys except the Third Form departed for their designated class modules. Chalky stayed behind. Two prefects came back in carrying heavy-looking equipment boxes.

"Boys," said Chalky, "this morning, as our headmaster Mr Steel has announced, I am leading you outside on your first Nature Ramble."

"Hurrah!"

"And Prefects Bulstode and Dangermouse will come along to assist me."

"Boo!"

Chalky switched on the caning machine to READY, and the booing subsided.

Actually the Thirds had good reason to fear the presence of Bulstrode and Dangermouse. Both prefects were key members of the Purple Android Brotherhood, a secret society originated by some previous form for purposes too dreadful to be mentioned. Their initiation ceremonies were known to be unspeakably hideous and physically almost impossible. And on today's Nature Ramble the Third Form's escorts were to be Boss Android Bulstrode and Fifth Stage Android Dangermouse, notorious throughout the unit for illicit hacking into the Forbidden Megabytes of Database Central.

The Third Formers, thinking of the ways in which Bulstrode and Dangermouse had made use of their forbidden knowledge, decided very suddenly that they would all be extremely well-behaved this morning. They all quietened down. Instantly. The dangers of a poisonous plague-ridden irradiated Outside were one thing, but a grumpy Bulstrode was another. They would be good. They listened to Chalky.

"Now, boys, this is an important stage in your development. Traditionally the Third Form Nature Ramble is the occasion when we give you your first experience of the outside world. Remember, boys, you will soon be among grasses and woodlands, breathing natural air in pure natural sunshine. So line up to receive your safety equipment."

The boys came forward. Chalky handed them respirators, goggles, nose filters, radiation monitors, pollution detectors, oxygen-deficiency gauges, antibacterial lozenges, epidermal cream and lipsalve.

"You see, boys, with a few simple precautions a Nature Ramble can be as safe and enjoyable as any other practical lesson. Ah, Figgin! The goggles go over your eyes, not your ears!"

Most of the Third behaved sensibly, clipping on their monitors and tucking their medication packs into their pockets. A few boys mistook the antibacterial lozenges for suppositories, but the two prefects soon corrected them.

Lawson put up his hand.

"Please sir, this trip sounds good fun and jolly educational, but what if we're Outside and there's a radiation alert?"

Chalky clicked his speaker-grille sympathetically. "A good question Lawson. Your interest earns you two merit points towards your term assessment —"

"Boo!"

"Teacher's pet!"

"What's a pet?"

"Boys! Quiet, please! As for Lawson's question, the weather-monitoring robots assure me that the atmosphere is stable and clear. You have to wear the detectors only as a routine precaution, in case some local radiation has been uncovered by storm damage or wild animals."

At the mention of animals the boys' attention was diverted.

"Wild animals!"

"Gosh"

"Isn't that what pets are?"

Their Biology Practicals had been confined to work with bean sprouts, since mammalian reproduction was not dealt with until the Fifth Form and the joint lessons with Unit 294 (female). Today they would see genuine live animals, not just holograms! They became so excited that Chalky feared they might over-exert themselves.

"Ooh!" shouted Smith minor gleefully. "Little fluffy animals!"

"Tufty squirrels!"

"Ickle bunny wabbits!"

"Slimy toads!"

Fatty Manners asked, "Are animals edible, like bean sprouts?"

"Yes," said Boss Prefect Bulstrode nastily. "I might find something special for you, Fatty-chops."

His voice cut through the hubbub, and the entire Third shuddered.

Chalky seized his opportunity, and while the Thirds were still subdued he marched them out from Big School, along the corridor to Outside.

It was a surprisingly short distance. Once Chalky had cycled them through the airlock and sealed it behind them, all the Thirds simply stood on the concrete looking around in amazement.

Ahead of them, across a wide flat expanse, was a high metal wall with a single doorway.

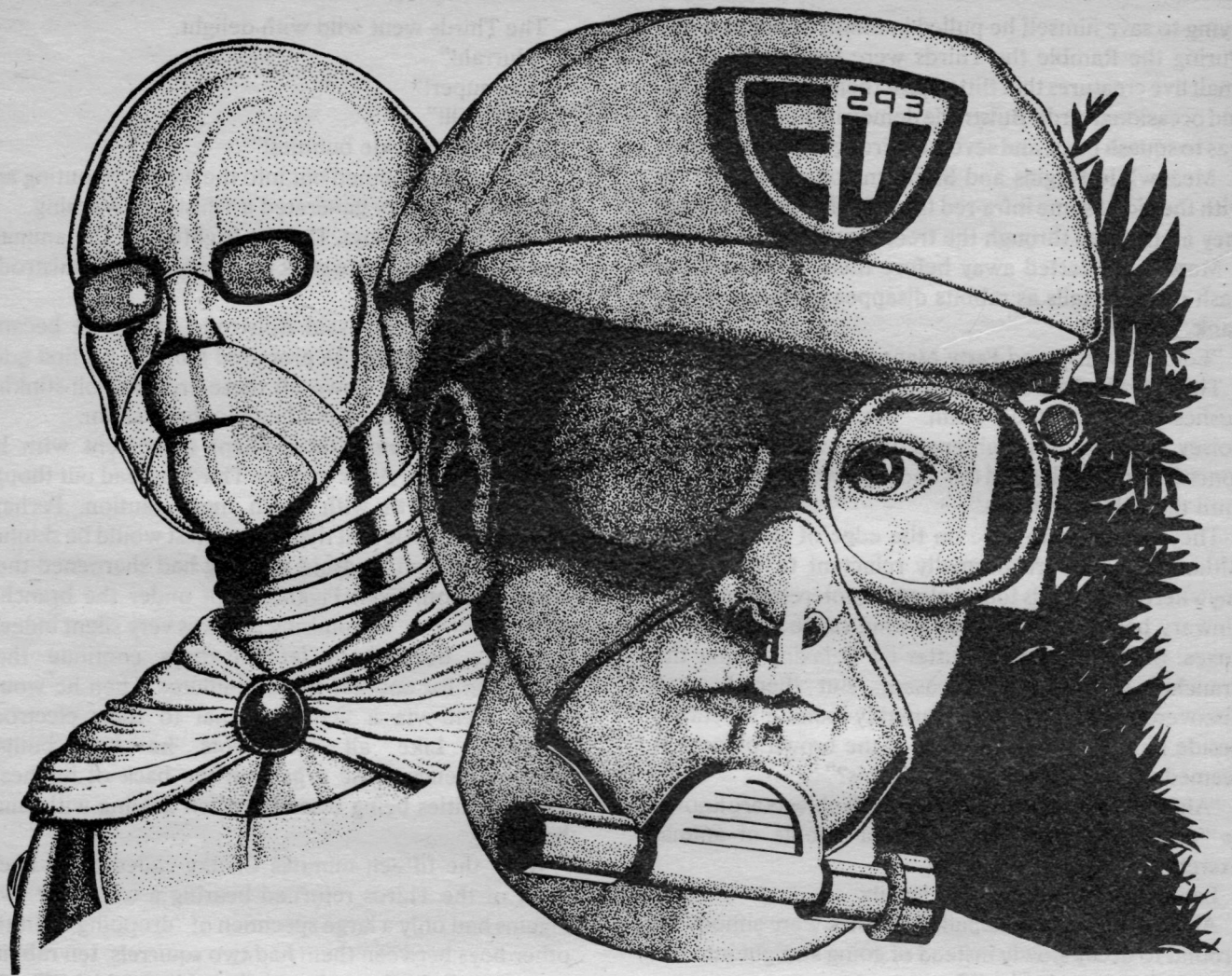
"Gosh," said Lawson. "Isn't Outside big?"

"And empty," said Smith minor.

The others made similar exclamations. Bulstrode and Dangermouse, who had made their own first Nature Ramble a whole two years previously, stood around looking superior. (Or as superior as anyone could look when wearing respirator, goggles and face cream.)

"This way, boys," said Chalky. He led them towards the distant doorway. All of them were unusually quiet.

The high nothingness of the grey-white sky was frightening in itself. Fortunately all the boys had been tested for agoraphobia during their routine second-year screening. In that screening Bulstrode minor had had to be recycled, which probably explained Bulstrode's permanent down on this form. The boys who had made it into the Third might not like the emptiness around them and above them, but they could face it.



"These "clouds" overhead," said Chalky helpfully, "are formed from atmospheric water vapour, with certain trace chemicals such as. . ."

Hastily the Thirds pushed their nose filters more firmly into their nostrils.

"The chemicals," Chalky went on, as they walked towards the door, "entered the atmosphere during the War of Human Self-Annihilation."

With the mercurial mood-changes of childhood, the Thirds cheered up at the mention of war. They stopped walking. They spent a few moments pretending to launch missiles and exterminate each other. Chalky was dismayed by their unruly behaviour.

"Boys! Boys! Dear me, this is quite unlike them."

"On the contrary, sir," said Dangermouse, "this is the preferred relaxation mode of the upper classes."

"BLAM! Ah-ah-ah-ah! Whoosh — BLAM!"

"I wish they would desist. Bulstrode, would you be so kind. . .?"

"Sure." Bulstrode cupped his hands around his respirator flap. He bellowed, "HEY, CRAPHEADS! SHUT UP OR DROP DEAD!"

Sudden silence. The Thirds froze. They recognised a Purple Android command when they heard one.

"Thank you, Bulstrode," said Chalky. "Good breeding always shows in the end. Come along now, boys."

Obediently the Thirds followed their schoolmaster as he clanked onwards across the concrete.

By now they were quite close to the perimeter wall. Above its upper spikes they could see tall green shapes,

fuzzy and irregular of outline, obviously merely the tops of much larger objects outside. Smith minor was the first to connect the greenery with his botany holograms.

"Please sir, are those trees?"

The other boys were puzzled.

"What did he call them?"

"Fleas?"

"No trees! Big green living plants!"

"Are they edible?"

Chalky cut through the chatter. Boys, they are indeed trees. We will see many more beyond the Wall."

("I'm sure he said fleas!" — "No, trees! Trees don't jump around and nip you!")

"And now we shall go through the Security Door, and venture into the unspoilt natural weeland itself. Please check your face masks and goggles."

Chalky triggered the door release, and the boys filed through.

The Thirds stood upon real green grass, facing real green trees. Again they were overwhelmed by the sheer size of everything.

"Here," said Chalky, "our Nature Ramble proper begins. Please have your specimen boxes ready, and apply your antiallergen creams now for fullest protection."

The Third Formers spread out in twos. Chalky gave them a running commentary as they took specimens of flowers, scraped off bark, studied leaf patterns, and fell in the stream. (The falling in was by Figgins, of course. In

trying to save himself he pulled in Smith minor as well.) During the Ramble the Thirds were fascinated by the small live creatures that flitted past them — flies, beetles, and occasional birds. Bulstrode demonstrated how easy it was to squash bugs, and several Thirds got quite expert at it. Meanwhile Figgins and Smith minor soon dried off with the aid of some infra-red from Chalky's optics. Then they all trooped through the trees towards a clearing.

More birds darted away before them. They saw the flash of white tails as rabbits disappeared into a grassy bank.

"Edible!" whispered Fatty Manners.

The Thirds had been pushing their way through bushes. Chalky halted them. "Wait here, boys. Our noisy approach has frightened off the wildlife. We will conceal ourselves behind this undergrowth and stay quiet until the wildlife returns."

They settled in to hide on the edge of the clearing. Although they were normally reluctant to sit quietly anywhere, the Thirds found plenty to interest them here. Unwary beetles would crawl within range of specimen boxes. Butterflies would flutter by. Relaxing under the branches seemed very pleasant. But then Lawson discovered some lumps of a muddy-looking substance beside him. He picked up one of the brown objects. It seemed sticky. "Please sir, what's this?"

"Ah. How interesting, Lawson. Such objects are known as "droppings." You are holding a sample of animal excreta."

Lawson dropped the lump hastily.

All the Thirds were appalled. Wastes were simply left around to decay slowly instead of going straight into the recycler? How unhygienic!

Worse was to follow. A striped animal appeared and pounced on some tiny form within the grass. They heard feeble squeaks from the victim. Chalky said softly, "You are watching a feral feline catching a field-vole." As they watched, the cat devoured the little grey body, including the skin and legs and tail. Chalky added informatively, "The cat is also devouring the voles's internal parasites, which will now dwell within its own intestines. This demonstrates the dangers of uncontrolled nutrition, eh Manners?"

Fatty merely gulped looked green.

The Thirds grew restless. They asked to be allowed to move around, to climb trees or start a fire. Sitting quietly in this dirty parasite-infested wilderness no longer seemed interesting. In nothing happened soon, Bulstrode whispered to Dangermouse, they would take Smith minor behind some bushes for the usual.

Hearing the restlessness, Chalky shook his cranium with the weariness of a teachobot whose batteries were no longer fully charged. "Not too much noise, boys. Remember you are being assessed on your participation today. Do you want to relax for a few minutes before resuming your studies?"

"Relax, sir? Ooh yes, let's find birds' eggs!"

"Rabbits!"

"Chase foxes!"

"Please sir, can we kill something?"

Their teacher did not hesitate.

"Certainly you may," said Chalky. "It will be good training for your future as Masters of the Earth."

The Thirds went wild with delight.

"Hurrah!"

"Oh, super!"

"Kill! Kill!"

"After those ickle bunnies!"

At once they fanned out into the woods, shouting and screaming. Chalky generated a whistle of warning.

"Not so loud, boys. Do not frighten off the animals. You must remember to stalk your prey quietly. Bulstrode, could you. . ."

"I'll show them," said Bulstrode. When he became Master of the Earth, he promised himself, his first edict would be to melt down all these creaking oil-stinking robots who had been holding him back so far.

Bulstrode demonstrated silent movement with his usual efficiency. After that the Thirds spread out though the undergrowth with much more caution. Perhaps Bulstrode's subtle hint that the noisiest would be skinned alive at the next Android meeting had sharpened their concentration. Even Figgins crept under the branches quietly. Lawson, a promising lad, was very silent indeed.

Chalky decided to let the boys continue their relaxation for another fifteen minutes. Then he would recall them via a general signal to their electrode implants. Like all teachobots he had built-in multifrequency sense organs in the back of his head, these facilities being essential when dealing with small boys.

After the fifteen minutes Chalky called them back. Most of the Thirds returned bearing a trophy or two. Figgins had only a large specimen of "dropping", but the other boys between them had two squirrels, ten rabbits, some small birds and a spiky thing which Chalky identified as a hedgehog.

All these rare examples of wildlife had been killed by their captors as per the useful graphics in the Young Upper-class Gentleman's Grade One Training Handbook.

However, two boys had not come back. They were Lawson and Bulstrode.

Fortunately Chalky's recall transmission could be used for target location through echo-analysis. He sensed that the two missing boys were only a short distance away.

"Come with me, boys," said Chalky grimly. "We shall bring back those two laggards. It will be the caning machine for them tonight, I fear!"

Following Chalky, the Thirds pushed their way through thick bushes and hurried across the more open patches. Silent stalking was forgotten. The more sensible boys guessed there had been an accident, and they rushed forward eager to practice bandaging or emergency amputation.

Suddenly they came upon Lawson and Bulstrode dragging a large limp form over the grass.

"We caught this animal!" cried Lawson triumphantly. "It's so big we can't carry it!"

"Well, well," said Chalky, while the other boys gasped. "I misjudged you. An excellent catch! Well done, both of you."

Bulstrode let go the arm of their find. "Good, isn't it?"

Lawson added, "I think it's what they call a woman, sir."

The creature lay unmoving upon the grass. Matted shoulder-length hair concealed most of its face, but the

boys could see that the "woman" was not wearing any facemask or other artificial protection. It was barefoot. The rest of its body was covered by a fluffy garment of sewn-together animal skins.

"A wild woman," said Lawson. He glanced at the creature's face, and gave a start.

"I say chaps, she's still breathing!"

Bulstrode scowled. "I said you should've hit her harder."

Lawson turned to Chalky. "Had I better finish her off, sir?"

The old teachobot clicked his gears with perplexity. "There should not be any woman living outside the Units, or indeed any adult human beings living anywhere. This does not accord with my reference data."

Smith minor said, "I think she's waking up."

"Oh please sir!" cried Lawson. "Let me finish her off, sir! Please!"

"Wait, boys," said Chalky. He inclined his head downwards, shifting his transmission frequency to the EEG range. Brain rhythms altered; the creature subsided into seemingly natural sleep.

Chalky continued, "I must ask you all to consider our problem very carefully. The wildlife lists of this area do not include human beings. Database Central does not record any human being as surviving the war, only certain smaller mammals, birds, insects and aquatic life. You children were recreated scientifically from preserved cells in the medical stores. Can this creature lying before us be a genuine woman?"

The Thirds looked doubtful.

"No."

"Can't be."

"Surely not!"

Bulstrode, though, was unusually thoughtful. "There were a few rumours," he said. "Blenkinsop in our year swore he'd seen something."

"True, o king," said Dangermouse. "He never recanted, even when we — Yaroooh!"

Bulstrode quietly reminded his chum not to discuss Purple Android business in public. While Dangermouse reeled back, the Third Formers gathered closer to encircle the unconscious creature.

"Of course it's a woman," said Smith minor. He touched her cheek gently. "Oh, her skin's soft! She's lovely!"

"She's awfully big," said Fatty Manners. "Is she edible?"

"I still want to finish her off," muttered Lawson.

Chalky clicked again anxiously. "Quiet please, boys. Let me check this presumed woman more closely."

His index finger extruded a knife-blade.

Chalky slit open the rough clothing to expose her body. The Third Formers all gasped loudly. Even Dangermouse recovered sufficiently to stand staring.

Bulstrode breathed heavily. "That's a woman all right. Look at them bazonkas."

"Quiet, please," Chalky repeated. He pushed apart the creature's legs and probed its genital area. "Yes, this is an adult human being. Without doubt."

"I knew it," said Smith minor.

"We must now decide what to do with her," said Chalky. He renewed his sleep-inducing transmission. "Is

she to be killed, or preserved? You will realise, boys, that our problem is one of classification." Was this creature a relic of the former human civilisation, an intelligent being whom all robots were programmed to serve, or was she merely another wild animal to be used for a moment's relaxation?

The Thirds were growing bored.

"Let's have some fun with her," said Figgins.

("I got some ideas," said Bulstrode.)

Lawson looked sulky. "You said we could kill something, sir. I want to kill this one! I found it!"

The Thirds nodded. They were ready to help him.

Only Smith minor disagreed.

"But she's human, sir! She's made clothes for herself and survived in the Outside! I vote we take her back to the infirmary and ask Metal Matron to look after her. Wherever she came from. We human beings should be nice to each other!"

"Stupid idea," said Bulstrode.

Chalky cut through the chatter, "Silence, boys! Oh dear, I wish my batteries were still fully charged. We have delayed here too long. It is time to settle this matter."

All the boys were listening. The forest was quiet, with only the faint rustle of leaves around them. Only the sleeping woman was unaware of Chalky beginning his judgment.

"There are excellent reasons, Smith minor, boys, for not being deceived by outward appearances. This creature cannot be a civilised human being. A moment's thought will show you why. Consider these points:

"One, her clothing is hand-made from only purely natural components. Clearly she has no supportive infrastructure, nor the labour-saving benefits of factory production.



"Two, she was caught by stealth, instead of meeting us openly to claim her rights, as a civilised person would do.

"Three, she lacks even the most rudimentary respirator medication, and so is inadequately equipped for this environment.

"Four, her solitary state shows that she does not belong to any of the close-knit social groupings essential to advanced society.

"And, five, she has nothing technological on her person, no weapons, nothing which might indicate a higher civilisation.

"So you can see, boys, this creature cannot be a civilised human being. She is only wildlife. She may be killed."

A great intake of breath sighed around the clearing, under the trees. The first voice to be heard was Lawson's.

"Oh, thank you sir! I'll see to her at once!"

He pulled out his Swiss Army knife and began selecting a blade.

The other boys shouted gleefully, even though they had already killed things themselves. Only Smith minor was silent.

"Ah, Lawson," said Chalky, as he transmitted new brain waves for the creature's revival, "you should remember that your education has trained you for this moment. Remember our fine school tradition of decency and fair play."

Lawson paused with knife ready. The creature was stirring.

"Fair play, sir?"

"Yes, Lawson. In your Free Exercise games of chase you give the other boys a start of twenty, do you not? A sporting chance, as we say. You should do the same here."

Lawson thought for a moment, fingering his knife, then nodded.

On the grass, the creature stretched and opened its eyes. It was awake. Bulstrode and Dangermouse each took an arm and helped it to stand up. The slashed

clothing fell away.

The creature looked around in bewilderment at the encircling boys. Then it saw Chalky and screamed.

"Bulstrode," said Chalky, "Let it go."

Lawson counted solemnly from one to twenty.

That night, while the Thirds slept peacefully in the dorm, Chalky downloaded into Database Central. He reported that the Nature Ramble had been very successful again this year. The boys had enjoyed themselves and had learned much.

In his assessment, Chalky awarded the maximum points to Lawson and to all the other pupils, with one exception. The name of that exception went up on the telescreen:

SMITH MINOR

David Redd

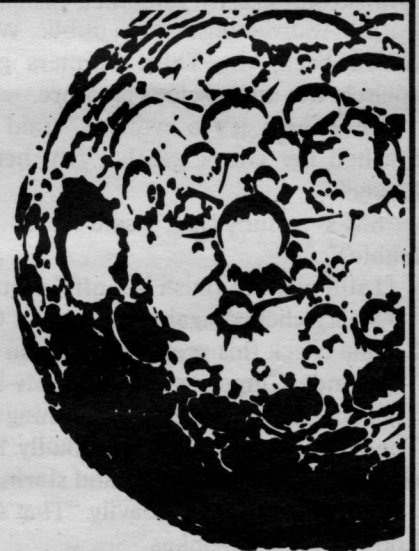
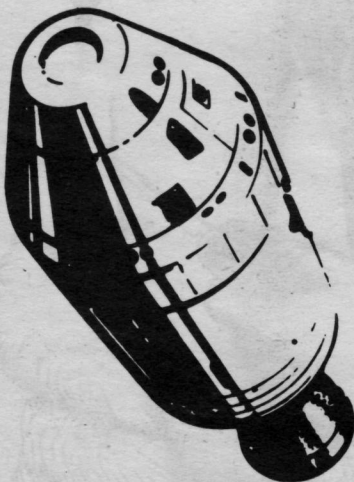
David Redd has contributed short stories to NEW WORLDS, F & SF INTERZONE — and now THE GATE. He regards the magazines as particularly valuable for encouraging new writers and for helping maintain a sense of community within SF.

His stories are generally composed in odd moments between civil engineering projects in West Wales, although part of SUNDOWN (S & SF, December 1967) was written in a launderette in Hackney while waiting for his washing to dry. Now aged 44, living in Haverfordwest with his family, David intends to write more often in future. He dislikes publicity.

PROBES

'Saturn calling
For Mars is crawling
With the enemy
So we'll have to see
What the morrow brings
And whether the angels
Which sing
Can help us now
Or whether the sacred cow
Is more complete
Or just plain meat.'

John Binns.



T.W.P.S.F

The Womens Press



Before we launched the SF list at The Women's Press in 1985 we had already published some science fiction titles: Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*, Monique Wittig's *Les Guérillères*, Sandi Hall's *The Godmothers* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*. But the people who bought those books probably didn't think of them as science fiction, seeing them as part of our general list of novels that centralised women — as characters, as writers, and, importantly, as readers. And so for the SF market, I doubt there was much awareness that The Women's Press published anything that might interest them. We were seen, in the early eighties, as a minority interest publisher.

At that time I was becoming increasingly frustrated by the unavailability of 'classic' feminist SF texts — let alone still-to-become classic feminist SF texts, or even ordinary common or garden feminist SF texts — for the course in Feminism and SF I was teaching at the City Lit. At one point someone on the course reported pile of Gollancz copies of *Motherlines* in a remainder shop and we all dashed out to snap them up and one or two students had dog-eared copies of *The Female Man*, but beyond that it was only Ursula LeGuin we could rely on.

We launched the SF list with high hopes, in a mass market format with mass market (or nearly) prices. We started off with the classic that I so desperately wanted to see in print in the UK: Joanna Russ, Sally Miller Gearhart's *The Wanderground*, and works by British authors that seemed to have faded from mind and memory: Josephine Saxton's *The Travails of Jane Saint* and Naomi Mitchison's *Memoirs of a Spacewoman*.

We've always had good coverage from the SF press — by which I mean that our books are widely reviewed if not always well received (there is a commitment to books even if there's a fear of feminism, unlike in the literary press where one sometimes wonders if there is even a commitment to books). But where were the countless hordes of committed SF readers, whose passion and desire for years had been to buy Joanna Russ, Jody Scott and Suzette Hayden Elgin? We learned that feminist SF was a minority interest within a minority interest. That the readers weren't queuing up outside the bookshops; that while 'feminism' is a turn off to some of the readers we wanted to attract, them 'science fiction' is a turn off to others. Even, it seemed, to those women who had been bowled over by Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*; I think one of the most engrossing and passionately realised political novels of the seventies.

So in 1987 we changed to a larger format to bring the SF into line with the rest of our books, and later up date them in the black and white spines for our fiction books.

This means that they are now trade rather than mass market paperbacks, and they appear on fiction as well as SF shelves in the bookshops. They are not alien territory for our regular, non SF readers.

I feel now that although there is a fair amount of crossover between The Women's Press general fiction and our science fiction, we still have a clear SF imprint. And that is enormously important, not least because it gives us the freedom to publish all sorts of weird and wonderful books that would be more doubtful propositions on a general list. Like Rhoda Lerman's *The Book of the Night*, which remains one of my personal favourites on the list, or Carol Emshwiller's *Carmen Dog*. This is one of the great joys of being an SF editor. Another advantage is being able to publish more short story collections than I would otherwise be able to: offering readers a range of work from established authors like Lisa Tuttle or introducing them to new writers like the Australian Rosaleen Love.

Over the five years since its inception the balance between reprints and new work has shifted in favour of new work. Of the five titles published this year, two are originals (Jane Palmer's *Moving Moosevan* and Lisa Tuttle's *Skin of the Soul*), two are introducing new writers from Canada (Elisabeth Vonarburg and Candace Jane Dorsey) and Carol Emshwiller's collection *The Start of the End of It All* includes published and unpublished stories. In 1991 we will be publishing one reprint, Suzy McKee Charnes' *The Vampire Tapestry* — a novel I've wanted to see back in print for ages — an anthology of stories, *Letters From Home*, by Pat Cadigan, Karen Joy Fowler and Pat Murphy, and Joan Slonczewski's *The Wall Around Eden*, which we bought from America. And following the success of *Skin of the Soul* a first novel from Melanie Tem, *Blood Moon*. There seems to be fertile ground in the area between SF and horror — not least because it offers the opportunity for subtle and profound investigations of the individual psyche — and we hope to do more.

Feminist science fiction is in a process of change, and this is reflected in part in that SF/horror crossover, already explored by Lisa Tuttle and Karen Joy Fowler. The old dichotomies of Them versus Us — women/men, east/west, state/individual — seem no longer so clear cut. The information technology revolution has, amongst other things, encouraged a perception of public and private relationships as founded on interaction rather than monolithic confrontation. This change is reflected too, it seems to me, in the concern of contemporary women writers with the individual experiences or, and

differences between, women, rather than with the creation of Women as a presence in SF.

Sexual politics remains at the heart of feminist SF, and at the heart of The Women's Press list. A post-modernist awareness of difference and uncertainty is not in conflict with this: rather it opens up the possibilities of its interrogation. I can make no prophecies about writing in the 1990s, but I feel sure that women currently writing in the field will continue to produce exciting work and that there will be many newcomers. The current state of the British book trade is not encouraging, and while we may still be seen as publishing books of minority interest, it seems increasingly important that we continue to publish them.

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Sarah Lefanu

Sarah Lefanu's publications include *Sweeping Statements: Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement 1981-1983* (co-editor) (The Women's Press, 1983) and the original science fiction anthology *Despatches from the Frontiers of the Female Mind* (co-editor) (The Women's Press, 1985). In her study of contemporary SF written by women, "In the Chinks of the World Machine" she expands her idea that science fiction is the perfect vehicle for the combination of feminist politics and imagination.

Her articles and reviews have appeared in a variety of publications, including *Foundaton* and *Marxism Today*. She works as an editor for The Women's Press, and lives in Bristol with her family.

FORTHCOMING ISSUES OF

THE GATE

SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY

All being well and subject to you buying the Gate in its 000's, the 1991 publication dates should be as follows:

Issue 4 18th March 1991

Issue 5 18th June 1991

Issue 6 18th September 1991

Issue 7 18th December 1991

GATE



REVIEWS

STONE OF FAREWELL

by Tad Williams.

Published by Century at
£14.99 hb £7.99 pb

The Stone of Farewell is a compelling piece of fantasy writing.

Set in the of 'Osten Ard' it tells the struggle of a race of mortal beings against the immortal Storm King and his legions. Cleverly interwoven within this plot is the tale of three magical swords — their nature and design. This book is the second in a series, but may be easily read without prior knowledge of the first publication.

The story features many 'Heros', the strongest character coming across as Simon - once a kitchen boy within a great castle called 'The Hayholt'. When this castle and his home was overcome by the Storm Kings terrible army, Simon was, sometimes involuntarily, a key member in a quest to conquer this immortal.

I find this book very easy to read, and Tad Williams develops the characteristics of each character admirably. I shall be eagerly looking forward to the next chapter of this epic adenture.

Ambrose Whelt.

THE GOLD COAST

Kim Stanley Robinson,
(Orbit, 1990, 389pp, £6.99
trade, £3.99 pb)

Reprint (Orbit, May 1989) of
novel first published in USA,
1988.

The Gold Coast is set in Orange County, 21st century California, amidst a culture of tracked multi-level freeways, designer drugs, video bedrooms and hi-tech industry. In the hands of many writers this

would be the backdrop for lurid adventure at the end of which the World Is Saved. Not so with Robinson, who has produced a distinctly laid-back story, narrated entirely in the present tense, about the lives of ordinary Californians, resembling nothing so much as a mainstream novel set in the future. Readers of ICEHENGE or THE MEMORY OF WHITENESS will be aware of Robinson's rare ability to deal adequately with hard-SF themes while at the same time creating a major interest in the characters. The latter skills is to the fore in THE GOLD COAST.

Jim McPherson is a single twenty-seven-year-old adrift in the affluent society; he works at two part-time jobs, goes to drug parties, cruises the freeways, doodles poetry and daydreams about the County's rural past. His father Dennis is an aerospace engineer working under pressure on two military projects; one troubled by Pentagon infighting, the other a Star Wars type project beset by insoluble technical problems. Dennis is impatient with his son's aimless lifestyle.

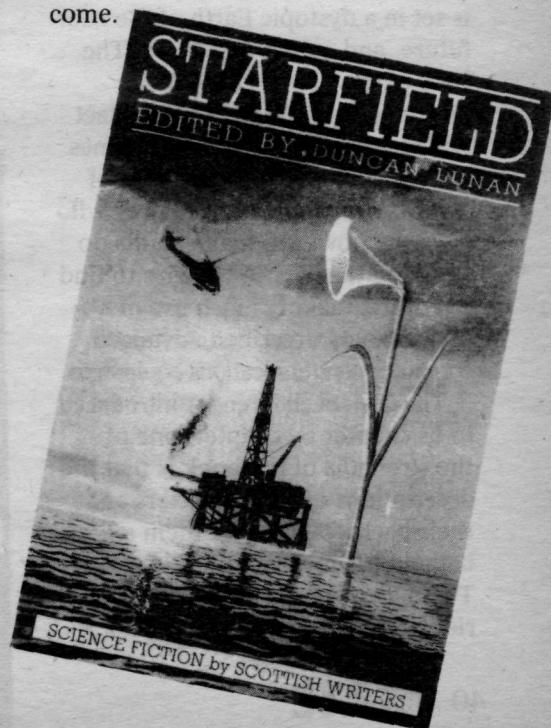
Out of boredom Jim becomes a minor urban terrorist attacking the facilities of military aerospace companies. Even then the outcome is not what happens so much as the way it is handled that makes this book such a rare achievement, and so hard to put down. The contradictions in the lives of the characters, their thoughts, description of the past, and of the society in which they move, are all subtly interwoven. Digressions into the nature of art and the workings of defense procurement are handled with equal skill and conviction. Marks Robinson as a major writer.

STARFIELD

by Duncan Lunan

Published by The Orkney
Press. hb £10.95

Anthologies have returned to the fore recently with Unwin's 'Other Edens' series and Sphere' Orbit's 'Zenith' volumes and this fashion can only be for the betterment of SF. Many authors can produce trilogies but I often wish that they had reached the heights of the 150,000 word-plus epic after learning the ability to tell stories. Anthologies are one place were they can learn the craft. STARFIELD is an anthology with a flavour all of its own, not only because all sixteen of the writers are Scottish, but the editor has had the good sence to include work which would be unlikely to be found in other collections. These pieces include the poems of Edwin Morgan and the challenging 'Big Fives' by Richard Hammersley. A book I will be recommending for some time to come.



ENGLAND 1940 INVASION

Derek Slade,

(Oriflamme, 1990, 502pp, £4.50)

Another Nazi alternative-history novel, in which the British lose the Battle of Britain and Hitler launches his Sealion invasion. The imaginary military operations in the Channel and Southern England are fascinating and keep one turning the pages for a while. Unfortunately all the characters are token figures whose token adventures soon make the book seem too long. Very little is made of Nazi beastiness; on the contrary the Germans are depicted as being mostly decent and a couple of British atrocities are included for 'balance'. Jews are hardly mentioned, and the apprehensions of British Jews are not mentioned at all! The abdicated King Edward VIII is an important character, but not depicted as the nasty pro-Fascist that some believe him and Wallis to have been. Better to read some real history - or a real novel.

CHILDREN OF THE THUNDER

John Brunner

(Orbit, 1990, 390pp, £3.99)

Older readers will remember John Brunner as one of the few full-time professional British science fiction writers of the Sixties, writing the well-received *STAND ON ZANZIBAR* and other books. He's still writing, and on this showing the stuff's still good.

CHILDREN OF THE THUNDER is set in a dystopic Earth of the near future, and mainly in Britain. The hero of the book is a freelance journalist who through his contact with an American sociologist comes to believe that a strange group of children has appeared, children who have the power to make adults do anything they want. He tries to find out more, making much use of convincingly described advanced computer communications equipment.

The deviant children are introduced to us chapter by chapter; one of the strengths of the book is that the descriptions of the characters and their backgrounds give them a life beyond the mechanics of the plot. The dystopic near future Earth, riddled with environmental and

political problems, is a recurrent theme in Brunner's work. In the British episodes of this book, as Brunner piles on the details of squalor, contaminated food, restrictions on Press freedom, racist thuggery, crashes and breakdowns caused by cuts in public spending, it is quite clear that here an extrapolation from Thatcher's Britain is intended. The ending is a little strained and unconvincing; a non-fatal flaw in an exiting and otherwise well-crafted book.

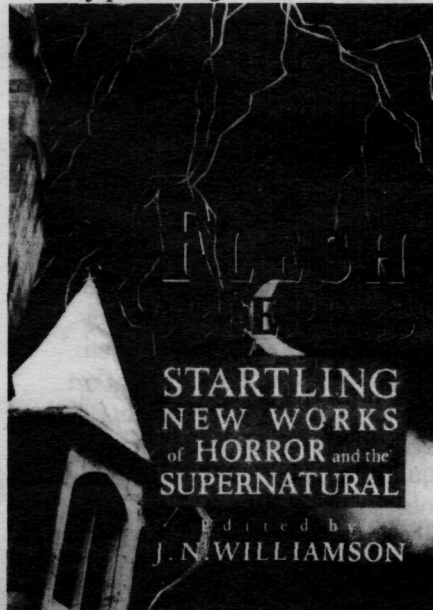
One may ask why Brunner has fallen from fashion; it may be precisely that his work is now too *bookstall* to be taken up by the SF gurus, being devoted to story and message rather than style. He also doesn't write epic fantasy, which has been vastly outselling SF, and his books have been sold as SF rather than any 'bestseller' category.

FLESH CREEPERS

Edited by J. N. Williamson

Published by Robson Books
hb £12.95

Subtitled 'Startling new works of horror and the supernatural' it's a fair anthology to try if you want to find out what's happening in American Horror fiction. The thirty-three offered stories and poems are divided into four subsections and have been provided by some well-known names (Masterton, Miller, Nolan and Bradbury) and a good showing by many lesser-known writers. Unfortunately, few of the stories are memorable, while some are unintentionally funny, (Stanley Wiater's 'When the Wall Cries' for instance). All together it makes you glad that Britain had people like Barker, Cambell or Lumley producing work.



THE EMPIRE OF FEAR

by Brian Stableford

Published by Pan pb £7.99

This is essentially a book that uses vampireism as a metaphor for the feudal system. The aristocracy are distanced from the peasantry by their immortality and their inability to accept change. At one point the 300 year old Prince Richard Coeur-de-Lion insists on using English bowmen instead of cannons. Even the hierarchical church had a vampire pope (Alexander IV) while the church of the people is seen as heretical when they condemn vampireism. Into this world come the emerging middle classes represented by Edment Cordery and his son Noell, searching for a rational explanation of vampireism. This is the dawn of the age of science and the twilight of superstition. The sections set in Africa evoke memories of H. Rider Haggard, a favourite of mine, and the book as a whole shows Brian's writing strengths, his powers of characterisation and descriptive prowess. I, for one, eagerly look forward to reading his forthcoming Werewolf novels.

BERSERKER:

THE ULTIMATE ENEMY

by Fred Saberhagen

Published by Victor Gollancz.
pb £3.99

Fred Saberhagen's fifth Berserker book from VG SF contains nine short stories written in the sixties and seventies. As well as the central theme of the eternal war between mankind and the ultimate robot war-machines, the stories present images of a civilisation devoted to survival. My favourites in the collection are 'The Annihilation of Angkor Aperron' and 'Wings out of the Shadow'. The first raises of smile when one remembers that Saberhagen was a consultant for the Encyclopedia Britannica, the second points out essential differences between the Berserkers (those robot warriors who surely represent all that is inhuman and evil in any military organisation) and humans who, when they become soldiers, still retain their humanity. Another fine story is 'Pressure' which has the mighty machines brought low by an unforeseen weapon.

Film & Video Reviews

Kim Newman

FLATLINERS

A group of medical students, desperate for a field of research in which they can excel the hated 'baby boomers', experiment with near death experiences, meeting in a highly convenient abandoned church on campus, where, led by the fairly maniacal Nelson (Kiefer Sutherland) they kill themselves under laboratory conditions, experience death for a few minutes, and are revived with an electric shock. Each has a different experience in the afterlife, and they all find that when they return they are haunted by the physical spectres of their greatest guilts: driven nut Nelson and common sense atheist David (Kevin Bacon) by the vindictive apparitions of children they used to bully, cold fish with glasses Rachel (Julia Roberts) by her drug addict Vietnam veteran father for whose suicide she feels responsible, and camcorder-toting Casanova Joe (William Baldwin) by the video images of all the women he's done dirt to. Meanwhile, any debate about what exactly happens in the afterlife is on an even more basic and patronising level than all that 'go into the light' guff from the **Poltergeist** movies, with all the steadicam-whizzing flatline sequences functioning as flashbacks rather than flash-forwards, Director Joel Schumacher, one of Hollywoods slickest and emptiest craftsmen (**St Elmo's Fire**, **The Lost Boys**, Andrew Lloyd Webber's threatened **Phantom of the Opera**), has here been handed a fascinating subject

matter, a decent cast of appealing brat packers, and enough resources to throw up some impressive sets, but still stumbles over the general incoherence of a well-written, well-structured script by Peter Filardi that annoyingly refuses to go anywhere. The result is an entertaining piece of

THE EXORCIST III

Fifteen years after the plot of **The Exorcist**, and thoroughly ignoring the events of the ill-remembered **Exorcist II: The Heretic**, Lieutenant Kinderman - the Lee J Cobb character from the first film, now played by the suitably middle-initialled George C Scott - is baffled by a series of bizarre mutilation murders with religious overtones, all of which bear the trademarks of the Gemini killer (Brad Dourif), a serial slaughterer who died in the electric chair at exactly the same instant Father Karras (Jason Miller) was taking his fatal fall down the long flight of steps after performing his exorcism. Following tosh that comes a poor second to **Ghost** as a sentimental fantasy thriller, and consistently drops its intriguing ideas in favour of more pictorial razzamatazz. Quite apart from the near-death concept, there's a marvellous notion - suitable for Ramsey Campbell or Stephen King - that we're all haunted by guilt over the way we treat other children, and the film pulls one terrific scene - courtesy of Kevin Bacon and actress Kimberly Scott - where David tries

to apologise to the grown-up who used to be the playground victim. But this is yet another dead end in a story that veers crazily all over the place, with pretty-pretty fog and water effects dominating almost every shot and an overwhelming sense of wasted opportunity. Also, as slobbering patrons of **The Abyss** know, it's highly inadvisable from a medical standpoint to use an electro-cardiac resuscitator on a leading lady without taking her bra off first. Near-death fans would do best to look up Dennis Etchison's novel **Darkside**, which deals with the subject in a more ambitious manner. The clues, Kinderman narrows the field of suspicion down to the inmates of a Washington hospital, where several of the victims, including Kinderman's priest best friend (ED Flanders), have been surprised and murdered. In a darkened cell, Kinderman finds Patient X, who looks a lot like Karras except when he's looking even more like the Gemini Killer and seems to have an unaccountable compulsion to explain the plot in long, ranting monologues. With William Friedkin occupied on his killer tree fiasco **The Guardian**, **The Exorcist III** finds William Peter Blatty, original author of the novel, stepping up to write and direct this sequel, following adapting his own follow-up book, **Legion**, Blatty began as a screen-writer for Blake Edwards, devising pratfalls for Inspector Clouseau, and made his directorial debut with the interesting philosophical oddity **The Ninth Configuration**, and this is a

very peculiar amalgamation of enervating wisecrack dialogue and religious editorialising, with only a few token traces of horror thrown in. Too much of the movie takes place in dark rooms where people talk and talk and talk - describing horrors that might more profitably have been on the screen - and the plot is a house of cards that constantly collapses, as Blatty the screenwriter poses Blatty the director challenges he can't meet. The film only comes to life in a few brief, illogical flashes - a possessed old woman crawling ignored on the ceiling, a white-robed figure with an impressive decapitation implement drifting after a doomed nurse. Looking at Blatty's cut, the producers decided that an **Exorcist** sequel really ought to have an exorcism in it somewhere, and so Nicol Williamson was called in for some extra Bible-thumping scenes which look exactly like tacked-on additions that pad out an already ludicrous climax to insane proportions. Although dressed up with a lot of talk about faith and the nature of evil, **Exorcist III** is still essentially yet another variation on the cycle of movies - **The Hidden, Child's Play, Shocker, The First Power** - in which a cop pursues a body-hopping serial murderer, even going so far as to recall Dourif from **Child's Play** to recreate his role.

JACOB'S LADDER

Long-unmade and often cited as 'the best unproduced screenplay in Hollywood', Bruce Joel Rubin's **Jacob's Ladder** script has the double misfortune to fall into the hands of TV commercial style freak Adrian Lyne - who did one quick rewrite just to hammer home the more obvious aspects - and to arrive on screen just after Rubin's far more successful **Ghost**, a less horror-filled variation on similar themes. Having given up on ever seeing this made, Rubin obviously transferred elements of it - the haunted subways, a black psychic, the love-lasts-after-death idea, and the use of a perky theme tune - to his other project, which makes this seem like the serious and failed original of which **Ghost** might be taken as a light and deft parody. For the Righteous Brothers' 'Unchained Melody' read Al Jolson's 'Sonny Boy', which

simply doesn't have any more the stuff of tearjerking, life-affirming transcendence. Suffering from flashbacks to a traumatic experience in Vietnam, Jacob (Robbins) wanders through New York, persecuted by strange creatures in stocking masks, plagued by different versions of his everyday world - apparently, his son has died and he has left his wife for a co-worker at the post office, but occasionally this seems to be a dream alternative to his happy families waking life - and a government conspiracy to cover up a germ warfare experiment that went wrong and forced his platoon to turn violently on itself. Ultimately, there are several twists one wouldn't want to give away although if you saw the revival of **Carnival of Souls**, you'll twig that whole footage-wasting conspiracy plot - which pays off with a ludicrous lump of exposition as a neurotic chemist telephones Robbins to explain a large chunk of the script - is a pointless blind alley. Despite Robbins' wastefully committed performance and some impressive visions of New York - circa - 1971 as Hell, this is ultimately more annoying than it is affecting, betraying the same species of superficial grime-as-glamour razzamatazz that sunk Alan Parker's **Angel Heart** also a Brit-directed dirge that would rather be a 'supernatural psychological melodrama' than an honest horror film - into an identical mire of pompous, post-generic sludge.

ARACHNAPHOBIA

Like **Tremors**, this is a nearly perfect monster movie, balancing all the requirements of the genre with just enough sly humour to take away from its familiar absurdity, and graced with nicely-judged performances, a perfectly evoked but neatly satirised small town setting and some pretty effective scare sequences. In a lengthy opening sequence that must have gobbled up a substantial portion of the budget, Dr Julian Sands is searching for new creepy-crawlies in the Venezuelan Jungle, and a photographer happens to get bitten by a lethal new spider species which stows away in his makeshift coffin and is transported back to the peaceful township of Canaima, California, for burial. Also new in town is Dr Ross Jennings

(Jeff Daniels), who is trying to escape the strain of the big city and immediately finds the country too stressful to stand, what with a house on the verge of falling down, redneck neighbours, an established old fart of a town doctor (Henry Jones) who decides not to retire and thus ruins Ross' practice, and his all-consuming, overpowering dread of anything with eight legs, compound eyes and a web. The big spider mates with a native Californian arachnid - in one of the few spider heavy petting scenes in the movies - and soon its deadly offspring are terrorising the town, specialising in Ross' few patients and thus getting him a bad name. Things escalate, and the professionals have to be called in - with glamorous pony-tailed poseur Sands spouting hard-to-follow entomological theories, while down-to-earth exterminator John Goodman providing dry comedy relief and commonsense bugspray therapy. Similar in feel to **Kingdom of the Spiders, The Birds, Frogs** and many another beasts-on-the-loose quickie, this is the high quality, Steven Spielberg-produced version of the same, complete with state-of-the-art spider wrangling and special effects, and a two-edged folksiness. Like **Gremlins**, this evokes delights of the traditional Spielberg-Capra small town, and then proceeds to show the horrors gnawing away beneath, lurking in the popcorn, the toilet bowl or the old barn. When was the last time you saw a film in which a crackerbarrel physician who gave sweets to children and protested about impersonal big city ways was shown to be a dangerous idiot and modern medicine came out on top? As in the best of Spielberg's early work, **Duel** and **Jaws** the climax finds an ordinary man standing alone, without any experts to help him, and facing his own phobia, plus the monster that threatens his house and home. And here first-time director Frank Marshall, previously one of Spielberg's trusty producers, really comes into his own with a squirmy cheer-along sequence that finds Daniels duelling with the Big Daddy spider in his own basement, with only an ozone-unfriendly aerosol, a cigarette lighter, bottles of vintage wine and a nailgun to protect himself. Outstanding.



Could this be an illustration of budding Author Julia Script, recently returned from the colony on the planet Akzidenz, giving her submission to THE GATE a final once over.