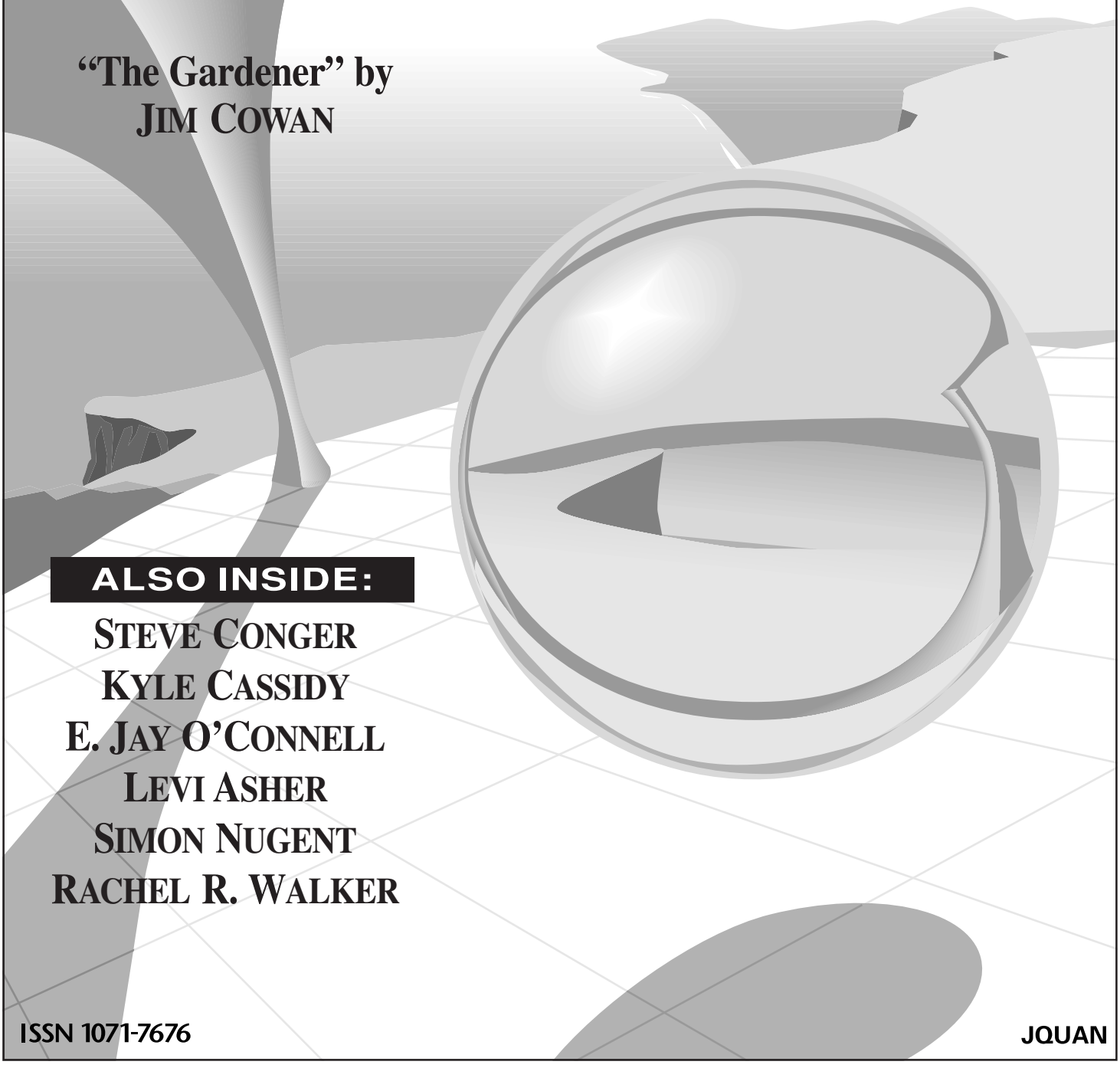
InterText

VOLUME 4, NUMBER 5 SEPTEMBER–OCTOBER 1994



"The Gardener" by
JIM COWAN

ALSO INSIDE:

STEVE CONGER
KYLE CASSIDY
E. JAY O'CONNELL
LEVI ASHER
SIMON NUGENT
RACHEL R. WALKER

ISSN 1071-7676 JQUAN

InterText

SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER 1994 VOLUME 4, NUMBER 5

Contents

Departments

First*Text:* *The Road More Traveled*
Jason Snell 3

Second*Text:* *Here Comes the Flood*
Geoff Duncan 3

Short Fiction

Sometimes a Man
Steve Conger *(sconge@seaccd.ctc.edu)* 5

The Gardener
Jim Cowan *(jimcowan@delphi.com)* 7

The Monkey Trap
Kyle Cassidy *(cassidy@saturn.rowan.edu)* 19

Serial Access
E. Jay O'Connell *(ejo@world.std.com)* 21

The Thieves
Levi Asher *(brooklyn@netcom.com)* 24

Underground, Overground
Simon Nugent *(simon@helpdsys.demon.co.uk)* 28

Fallen Star, Live-In God
Rachel R. Walker *(rwalker@awod.com)* 31

The *InterText* Staff

Editor
Jason Snell
jsnell@etext.org

Assistant Editor
Geoff Duncan
gaduncan@halcyon.com

Assistant Editor
Susan Grossman
c/o intertext@etext.org

Cover Artist
Jeff Quan
jquan@west.darkside.com

intertext@etext.org

***InterText* Vol. 4, No. 5.** *InterText* (ISSN 1071-7676) is published electronically on a bi-monthly basis. Reproduction of this magazine is permitted as long as the magazine is not sold (either by itself or as part of a collection) and the entire text of the issue remains unchanged. Copyright © 1994, Jason Snell. All stories copyright © 1994 by their respective authors. *InterText* is produced using Aldus PageMaker, Microsoft Word and Adobe Illustrator software on Apple Macintosh computers and is converted into PostScript format for distribution. For information about back issues of *InterText,* see page 4.

Send all submissions and subscription requests to intertext@etext.org

***InterText*'s next issue will be released November 15, 1994.**

FIRST TEXT

Jason Snell

THE ROAD MORE TRAVELED

WELCOME TO TORTURED Metaphors 101. Today, class, we'll be discussing the tortured metaphor of The Road. But first, let me give you an example:

THE ROAD TO *INTERTEXT* HAS BEEN AN INTERESTING one. Though it's now getting toward the end of 1994 and I'm editing a electronically distributed fiction magazine that's read by thousand of people on six continents, I was on The Road long before *InterText* first appeared in early 1991.

Now, my first experience with Internet publishing was *Quanta*, when it first appeared in 1989. This story goes back further.

In 1985 I was a high school student armed only with an Apple IIe computer, a 300 baud modem, and a lot of spare time. So what did I do? I ended up as the operator of the only computer bulletin board system in Tuolumne County, California.

At the time, most of the Apple II bulletin boards I knew were involved in only two sorts of business: software piracy and adolescent chats about what your favorite pirated game was. And so, for a while, that was what my bulletin board, *Starbase 209,* focused on. Pirated software and inane conversation, all on an Apple II with about 128K of RAM and 800K of disk space. It was a cozy place, to say the least.

I lost interest in piracy pretty quickly. Instead, I was drawn to another section of my system—a "library" of plain text files, usually filled with information about piracy or how to build letter bombs. Classy stuff.

What did I do with that area? I turned it into an on-line fiction area, featuring stories that my friends and I had written. Looking back on that time (and on those files—I still have most of them), I wince at just how horrible my writing was.

The quality of the fiction I wrote in the mid-'80s isn't really the issue, however. The key is that I had been drawn to creating works of fiction, editing them, formatting them for the limitations of the on-line format, and putting them out for people to read. They became the most popular section of the system, especially when a friend of mine and I began writing a monthly adventure serial—always featuring a cliffhanger ending, of course.

Though the audience was sorely limited and the quality of the material was questionable at best, those stories were the dirt road that became the paved thoroughfare that is *InterText*. I shut down *Starbase 209,* went off to college, and began exploring the Internet. On one Usenet newsgroup (probably *rec.arts.startrek),* I read an announcement from a student at Carnegie Mellon University saying that an on-line science fiction magazine was starting up. I sent in one of those stories that appeared on the bulletin board ("Into Gray"), and it appeared in the first issue of Daniel K. Appelquist's *Quanta*.

In *Quanta* I read about another on-line magazine, Jim McCabe's *Athene*, and subscribed to it. And when Jim McCabe announced he no longer had the time to produce *Athene*, I decided that I'd create something to replace *Athene*. On The Road again.

My rationale for starting *InterText* was that since *Quanta* was a science fiction magazine, if *Athene* went away there'd be no place on the Net for writers of non-genre fiction to go. And at the time, it may have been true.

Of course, since then the size of the Internet has grown radically and any number of on-line publications have sprung up. More appear each day, and while some fade away quickly, others seem to be in it for the long haul.

I'll bet some of the editors of those publications got their start someplace like where I got mine—some bulletin board in an out-of-the-way place. But now it's nearly ten years later, and we don't have to toil in isolation anymore. We're all out here on the Net together.

It couldn't have happened at a better time. Heck, if it happened ten years ago, people worldwide would've seen the awful stories I wrote at the age of 14. Instead, it's just people in my home town. I can live with that.

I CAN SEE FROM MY WATCH THAT WE'RE ALL OUT OF TIME for today. But we're not done with The Road yet, class. Your homework: work 50 different permutations of the phrase "Information Superhighway" into a two-page essay. My suggestion? Write a news story about the Internet. It'll be easy.

SECOND TEXT

Geoff Duncan

HERE COMES THE FLOOD

I DON'T KNOW IF YOU'VE NOTICED, BUT THE INTERNET is growing.

Sure, there's been plenty of off-line hype in the papers and on the talk shows. *Newsweek*—that bastion of politics and info-graphics—has a new page called "Cyberscope" in which they profile on-line issues. CNN has developed a tendency to pounce on stories about the Net and its culture, particularly when it might involve something scandalous. And there's *Wired,* the self-anointed

travelogue for digital hipsters, preaching its own revolution, flashing fluorescent colors, and declaring NCSA Mosaic the greatest thing since the Last Supper. The *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* alternately declare the Internet a ripe, fast growing market, then say its size is overestimated. Whatever. It's clear The Establishment is starting to plug in and get on-line.

Of course, the hype hasn't been limited to traditional media. Commercial on-line services are engaged in a shoving match to see who's More-Internet-Than-Thou. Delphi was the first to offer significant Internet access as part of its package, but it wasn't until America Online released torrents of "uncouth" newbies into Usenet newsgroups that we started to see a culture clash between longtime Internet geeks and people who thought *alt.cyberpunk* was just another Billy Idol discussion group. And it wasn't just casual users—businesses with AOL accounts started to post rampantly to newsgroups, trying to tap into that vast, untapped market in cyberspace. And now even the venerable Compuserve is promising high-speed, full Internet access to its customers within a matter of months.

And let's not forget that software companies are beginning to strike poses. Apple's latest operating system includes with the software Macs need to connect directly to the Internet; OS/2 and the next version of Microsoft Windows aim to do one better by bundling plug-and-play applications that put users directly on-line (for a modest fee). All this will increase the number of people and businesses looking to get on-line.

It's been happening for a while. Think of the fast-growing commercial use of the Internet, with companies setting up services to advertise products and take orders on-line. It's now possible to shop for books, clothing, software and pizza via the Internet—activities that would have been inconceivable as little as three years ago. And there have been the first serious abuses of the Net by commercial interests, such as the "green card" fiasco brought on by the Canter & Siegel law firm and the resulting backlash from the network community. And how many direct messages for products and services have you received by email? Admittedly, I'm a little more visible than the normal network user, but I receive at least one unbidden advertisement per week, for everything from X Windows software to mail-order catalogs.

Is this what we really want? Is the on-line community doomed to a deluge of infomercials and direct mailings, just like we are in real life?

My feeling is that commercial users will eventually figure out how things work on-line, if for no other reason than that it makes financial sense for them to figure it out. No company is going to want to go on the Net and make a fool of itself, thus alienating a fast-moving and highly vocal market. But someone has got to set an example for how to do it right.

That's where we come in. History has shown that commercial interests have to respond to the demands of their customers. As "the target market," the on-line user community can control the direction of commercial activity on the Net by how we respond to it. If you don't like the way a company is promoting a product—by, say, sending you mail about it every Tuesday—tell them why. If you think a particular commercial posting to a newsgroup is inappropriate, don't let it pass by: *say* something about it. One message is sufficient; there's no need to start (or contribute to) a flame war. But let them know.

There are examples out there of how to be on-line effectively; however, one person's example of ideal on-line marketing is for another person a portent for the end of the world. The important point is that, if you're on the Net to take advantage of it resources and participate in what the future will bring, take the time to support on-line efforts that reflect *your* idea of what that future should be. Similarly, take the time to point out inappropriate activities and tactics, because if no one speaks up, the people behind those activities will just get better at being inappropriate.

For years the Internet has been managed by a kind of consensus of its users—don't let commercial activity on the Net suddenly make you feel you don't have a voice in the way things are done.

INTERTEXT

CURRENT AND BACK ISSUES

- **FTP:** Access *network.ucsd.edu,* in the */intertext* directory, or *ftp.etext.org,* in */pub/Zines/InterText*
- **World-Wide Web:** Our issues and a hypertext index with links to every story we've published are at URL: *http://www.etext.org/Zines/InterText/*
- **Gopher:** Access our Gopher location at *ftp.etext.org* in */pub/Zines/InterText* for stories in ASCII format.
- **CompuServe:** Access the Electronic Frontier Foundation Forum (GO EFFSIG), and enter the " 'Zines from the Net" library section.
- **America Online:** Access keyword PDA, then select *Palmtop Paperbacks/Electronic Articles & Newsletters*
- **GEnie:** Access the library of Science Fiction & Fantasy Roundtable #3, found by typing SFRT3 at any prompt.

SOMETIMES A MAN

BY STEVE CONGER

• Getting close to the natural world is a goal every weekend camper can understand. But there's a big difference between viewing nature from the outside and seeing it from within. •

I AM FIVE MICE IN A WHEAT FIELD. FROM THE DISTANCE, the great thunder of a combine. Dust billows and swirls. Scurrying over the shuddering earth to a clump of grass by an old fence. Watch without blinking ten eyes.

Yesterday a magpie, black-winged, tipped with white, trailing a long spear of a tail, hopping along the roadside picking at the pulped remains of squirrels.

Sometimes a man.

BEGAN PERHAPS AS A MAN. BORN WITH TWO HANDS AND feet, mouth open crying for air, squeezing it into reluctant lungs. Sponged off, carefully wiping the blood and amniotic fluid from the corners of the mouth, from between the small fingers, wrapped in a blanket and left alone in a crib beneath a burning light.

Once a bear—a lot like a man. Stood erect in a huckleberry patch, ripping leaf and berry from the branch, swatting at yellow jackets, rubbing my back against the crumbling bark of an old snag. Ambled through the darkness, sniffing at the slight breeze. Sometimes ripped a rotting log open and licked up the ants as they boiled loose. In winter, curled up in a hollow beneath a log, snorted and snored, and occasionally woke up listening, startled out of a dream like a man.

When a man, dreams came often. Sometimes sleepless for fear of dreams. Read late nights or watched TV or wandered alone to a bar and nursed a beer until it became as bitter and tepid as those nights. No memory of what the dreams were about—only that they opened on a great emptiness, like a winter sea at twilight, the endless gray swells fading into the grayer curve of the sky. Squalls, veils of black rain and a lone seabird poised silent in the dim light. Awake arms would curve around a hollow, a cold depression in the sheets, as if a form carved out of snow had lain there and then had blown away.

When a coyote, loped along the edges of snow-swept fields, stiff blond grasses poking through troughs of wind-crusted snow. Drank from the trickle of small streams beside red bramble brittle with ice, under the trunks of huge cottonwoods, their last few leaves rattling in a cold breeze. At the sound of cars on the road, slid into shadow and watch as they passed, testing the scents on the wind, filled with a strange disquiet.

Her words returned sometimes in the rattle of cattails by the pond in the long dead grass at summer's end. *All things forming, reforming every instant. Leaf falls to ground, mold, bacteria, insects convert it to soil, roots reabsorb it, mix it with light, buds flower, swell into fruit, fruit eaten, seeds shit on the ground, new plants sprout.*

Atoms dance—gnats in a shaft of sunlight. Her voice dancing.

We are all star stuff, cinders belched from the sour bellies of dying suns. Matter is a self-renewing matrix, a spider's web woven to catch passing energies and suck some use from them before they pass through. The initiated can change the matrix, respin the web, become other.

Easier, however, to change than to return. Home is the intuition of a pattern, a structure through which atoms pass and become you for an instant or less. The ego is not enough—made of words more than of cells and tissue, a pleasant or unpleasant fiction we narrate to connect across gaps of lost time. The intuition is deeper than I. Without it—

HER EYES WERE AN ODD SHADE OF GREEN, AND IN HER left eye was a disturbing fleck of gold. Sometimes, making love, her pupils would widen and it would seem as if the whole world were lost in them—but then she would close them and hold tight and it wouldn't matter if the world were lost or if it were ever found again.

Don't remember the first meeting. Sense of a river bank, slow curling waters, sunlight and the shadow of aspen leaves. A flutter behind, as if a bird had landed, and she was there.

Don't remember the first meeting. Sense of a river bank, slow curling waters, sunlight and the shadow of aspen leaves. A flutter behind, as if a bird had landed, and she was there. Talk came easily and something about her smile began to thaw the winter loneliness.

She followed back to the apartment, curled catlike on the couch, and stayed. Never questioned it, never looked for a motive, afraid that if looked at too closely the magic would evaporate. Alone again in the cold morning, heating water to make a cup of instant coffee, listening to the radio for company. When she was there the dull rooms

breathed an air of excitement, scents of warm fur and wild winds, feather, pine, huckleberry, wild rose.

Once, when an owl sitting on a dark branch that sighed and creaked in the night wind, looked into a window steamed with the moist evaporation of the breaths and teas within and sensed that air. A form moving behind the misted glass like the moon behind a thin cloud, shifting, dancing. Wind rustled the feathers on the head and back. Sat and did not move.

Dreams pursued, as always when a man, but with her coming the dreams changed. Nights were filled with the presence of animals, the pad of a cat's feet, the whir of a wing, the pant of a dog, the gleaming eyes of a raccoon sorting through a glittering jewelry box, the rustle of mice on the closet floor. But always when the dreams grew so strong that sleep broke, there would be nothing but her, sitting on the bed, looking out the window at the stars shining through the branches of the tree. *Don't you ever sleep?* She would just look gently and then turn again to stare into the night.

When it happened…. Awoke one night, cold. The window was open as she preferred it, but she was not there. The bed was still warm beside. She must be in the bathroom or getting a drink of water. Closed the window. But awake, listening, heard nothing, no bare feet on the floor, no sound of water running. The low electric hum of the alarm by the bed.

Ten, 20, 30 minutes and she did not return. Sleepless, not daring to think, to open the gates, to let the night flood in—afraid she may have left as silently as she had come, afraid of infinite spaces, afraid of nameless things.

Driven out of bed by the ache of fear. Pacing the room, staring out the window at the dark branches of the tree. The sidewalks washed chalk white beneath the streetlamps. The empty streets. The blank windows of the other houses. Tried to read but the words swam on the page. Went down to the kitchen, walked through the dark living room and then came back upstairs to the bedroom. Pacing, empty, listless, finally settled into a chair neither asleep nor awake.

In the half-light before dawn a scratching sound at the window. Roused to look and saw two green eyes, a cat, balanced on a branch, tapping at the window with its paw. Feeling a cold deeper than the morning's, opened the window.

WHEN A CANADIAN GOOSE, WOULD WHIRL UP OFF THE water in the pre-dawn when the sky was pale and empty of stars except for the morning star, before the sun flashed through the cattails and the day began. Others would honk beside and would bank into the wind and take a turn over the town and the houses outside of town. Searching the rooftops, smoke smearing from chimneys, hoping for a signature of something almost forgotten. Studying the layout of the streets trying to read the labyrinth, to trace the path that leads to some center. But then the sun would explode onto the water and light all the windows on fire. Swirl, bank, away.

"TEACH ME. SHOW ME."

Desperately she—*No. You want it too much. You should neither want it nor not want it. You are too eager. Change should be a fact uncolored by emotion, an inevitability, part of the process, to be other, to be elsewhere.*

A moth fluttering against the window, soft tap of its wings, an ant slipping down the plastic sealing the doorjamb, a beetle scuttling across the vents, a wolf pacing in the corner of the room…

Door closed, the cracks sealed with clothing, plastic taped over, the windows shut, locked, the furnace vents closed, taped. She awakens. *What are you doing? You cannot force me to—* A moth fluttering against the window, soft tap of its wings, an ant slipping down the plastic sealing the doorjamb, a beetle scuttling across the vents, a wolf pacing in the corner of the room, a bear on its hind legs, a lion crouched, an eagle screeching and falling talons-forward but stopping short of scratching. Hours. A kaleidoscope of forms, but did not move, unmoved, stone-faced, stone hearted. At last in the dawn she came, herself, and sat at the end of the bed, hair wet and curled on her shoulders. *You want too much.*

"HELP ME."
"If I help you I lose you."
"Help me."
"You don't know what you ask."
"I won't let you go until you show me."
"Here," she sighed.

WHEN A FISH, WOULD HIDE IN THE COMFORT OF THE bank's shadow, moving just enough to hold against the current, waiting to see what the stream would bring—a fly, a worm swept loose from the shore wiggling red, eggs, larvae. Quick to react to the play of light and shadow. Rising to a dimple in the surface tension, a tiny pattern of ripples. Once rising, startled by the image of a face broken on the facets of the water. Eyes that drew, but a flick of the tail, darting away.

Her eyes green, pupils not quite round. Flecks of phosphorescence, the one brown flaw.

"WHY DID YOU COME TO ME IF I AM SO UNSTABLE, IF YOU believe my self is so unformed?"

"You were so lonely."

A STONE FALLING DOWN A LONG WELL INTO COLD water. "Don't worry about me. I can do this. I'll be back. We'll travel this world together."

"I hope that's true."

"Let's do it."

She sighed sadly. Unweave, weave, the new web, the hairs on your arms are feathers, your bones are light and hollow, your lips are hard beak curved to tear at prey. Your eyes tiny, sharp enough to see a mouse stirring the grass 150 feet below. Toes curled into talons. *Fly, eagle, but don't fly from me. I don't think I'll be able to find you again, if I lose you now.*

But to wings that have never felt the wind, the lift of air warmed by stone, the world so wide—

A DEER ON THE EDGE OF THE WHEAT FIELD. FIVE MICE scurry by hooves. Looking up in terror at the combine billowing chaff and dust. Nostrils flare. The scent of diesel, the scent of man. Hesitant before running.

Sometimes a man.

STEVE CONGER sconge@seaccd.ctc.edu

Is a poet and a computer instructor with a great interest in languages from Homeric Greek to Visual BASIC. He currently lives in Seattle, Washington and teaches at Seattle Central Community College.

THE GARDENER

BY JIM COWAN

• In the tradition of Cardinal Bellarmine and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, here is a tale of a priest caught between doctrine and his relentless pursuit of truth. •

Kyrie

YOU, AN EMISSARY FROM THE HOLY FATHER himself, have come to question me? I am sure you understand my surprise. I am an old Jesuit sitting in the sun, dreaming away the afternoon in this quiet seminary garden. What could I know that is of such interest to Rome? Perhaps of interest to the entire world, you say? Surely you know that my order has suppressed my thoughts for 40 years. What has happened to arouse the Holy Father's sudden interest?

Say nothing—I know why you have sought me out. I will tell you the story you have come to hear and answer the question you have come to ask. Indulge me. I am an old man and I may seem to ramble, but I am no fool. I am a Jesuit and an ordained priest, and I am a graduate of the Sorbonne's school of xeno-technoarcheology, right here in Paris. You would do well to pay attention.

You want me to tell you the story of how the quantum engineer Angstrom and I went to the planet Paschal II. You want me to tell you about Paschal's alien technology. I must warn you that my story will answer the Holy Father's question, but I doubt that the Holy Father will like my answer.

Isn't this garden beautiful? Let's take this path that winds between these irises and lilies. Charming. Here we will sit in this small, secluded arbor. I'll sit where the sun will shine on my back and you may sit there, on that wooden bench, in the shade, so the brightness will not shine into your eyes.

Ruins abandoned by an alien race were found in several local systems. Your teachers probably did not teach you about the period of theological anguish caused by these discoveries.

My story begins 20 years and three popes ago. I was 50 (I must add that I was fit and muscular) when a signal was received from an interstellar probe that had been silent for years and given up for lost. The probe was one of our Catholic probes, one of many such automatons sent out to seek the heathen.

Seeking the heathen. All that happened before you were born, when ruins abandoned by an alien race were found in several local systems. Your teachers probably did not teach you about the period of theological anguish caused by these discoveries. Non-human intelligence was seen as a mortal threat to man's central role in God's vision of the unfolding universe. No, they wouldn't teach

you all the anguish. Instead they taught Rome's charitable compromise: intelligent aliens became an untapped source of heathen, making conversion the Church's obvious interstellar task. Thus the Church, and through the Church all mankind, was restored to its rightful place at the center of God's plan.

These interesting ideas are worth examination. One must first assume that heathen alien have real souls to save, which gives rise to some absorbing theological disputes. One must also assume that any converting to be done would be done by us, not by the aliens. But I said I would not ramble. In the abandoned ruins those first explorers found alien technology that was functional yet quite inscrutable. These machines (the word machine is misleading but there is no other word) manipulated a mysterious relationship between thought and thing. Alien technology is like the scent of honeysuckle on a calm, moonless night. The scent reveals the presence of the flower, but not the flower itself.

What I admire most about alien tech is its elegance. There is no structure, no obvious device, no clever machine—only an elegant location where an effect is triggered by a certain state of mind.

Is it true that Rome has aborted these futile attempts to find the alien race? Does Rome finally believe they have not set foot on their abandoned planets for a hundred thousand years? Perhaps our young new pope has been convinced by a hundred years of evidence. After all, he is trained as a scientist. Are you surprised that a biologist could be elected pope? If I didn't know better I would think I had been dreaming.

No matter. The aliens vanished who knows where, leaving behind their dormant technology, and we xeno-technoarcheologists fumble with its mysterious blend of material physics and spiritual metaphysics.

Are you comfortable on that bench? Good. I like to rest here in the afternoons. The drone of insects masks the hum of the traffic outside the wall. Outside the *garden* wall. That phrase is important. To speak of alien ideas is very difficult and best done through metaphor. In my forbidden writings I have said that metaphor is the poetry of reason.

See there, beyond the linden tree—do you see the hule patiently weeding amongst the flowers? A young official like yourself who works inside the Vatican probably has no experience with hules. They are manufactured creatures, wordless, two-legged things, cobbled together in vats from assorted mammalian genes, slaves bred for lives of toil. We took three hules to Paschal II. They are part simian—see how he holds his hoe with his thumbs?—and part canine. They have the eagerness of a dog and the intelligence of a higher ape, which is why the path we took is so well-swept. Although their hairy faces lack expression, one can see from their gait that they wear their coveralls with pride. They think they are more than animals.

But back to my tale. The probe had wandered light-years off its programmed course. I will offer an explanation for this later. Fifty light-years from here it had found an Earthlike planet with a single alien ruin. From low orbit around this blue-white globe the probe—which was equipped with a whimsical database of minor figures from the history of Catholicism—named the planet Paschal II. Even though we religious have time on our hands and can learn many unimportant things, you may not know that Paschal II was Pope from 1099 to 1118, *anno Domini*.

The orbiting probe reported on its survey of Paschal II. There were cloud-streaked oceans and snow-capped mountains sweeping down to gloomy forests. Lush jungles hid the bulk of the biomass and dry savannas teemed with animals. On a clifftop beside a broad estuary stood a white building, a massive dome resting on slender pillars. This was the only sign of ancient alien visitation. The temple, as we came to call it, stood at the center of a wide terrace that looked over the eastern ocean.

The probe launched several pods of scientific instruments into Paschal's atmosphere. They all failed during their descent, reporting in their last seconds temperatures approaching absolute zero. If that were true, Paschal II should have been a wasteland of frozen gas. Right away the small community of Catholic xeno-technoarcheologists suspected that the entire planet was protected by an AMF—an anti-machine field. A few other AMF's, small ones, were known at that time, but experience with them was very limited.

Have you read my report of our expedition? Did you blow the dust from its cover and read it in some corner of the Vatican Library? Then you already know how Angstrom and I made the descent from orbit, even though in an AMF all machines freeze and fail when, and only when, you try to use them. Intent to use is the mark of the alien technology.

What I admire most about alien tech is its elegance. There is no structure, no obvious device, no clever machine—only an elegant location where an effect is triggered by a certain state of mind. My first encounter with alien tech was as a graduate student on the planet Passion. The tech was a simple staircase. Some people, some of the time they climbed it, arrived at the top with

memories of things that never could have happened. They would talk as if their new memories were real, even write them down, but if they walked down the stairs they forgot those memories. We never understood what triggered these effects, or discovered the purpose of this machine, if I can use that word. We've never understood the workings of any alien tech.

AMF's are a rare form of alien tech. Only a few have been found, and only on three or four planets. Each protects a small area of space and—since on two occasions AMF's have appeared and later disappeared—perhaps they protect small areas of time as well.

Did you know that it was I who discovered the Tower of Echo? No? You haven't heard of the Tower of Echo? Well, I'm not surprised. It promised to be truly dangerous… to Rome, I mean. But the Tower is another story, and I promised not to ramble.

Paschal II is still the only planet completely protected by an AMF, making it something of an instant Holy Grail.

Humor an old man for a moment. When you were in the library, reading my report, did you see my proscribed essays gathering dust in some corner alcove? Did you glance at any of my work? No? Perhaps you didn't know my writing was the reason I went to Paschal.

As a young man I would express my thoughts in small essays which I would show to my friends. My ideas were well-received by a widening circle of thoughtful readers and took on a life of their own—electronic samizdat. In time, my essays came to the attention of the Office of the Congregation of the Faith. What a benign name—*The Office of the Congregation of the Faith*—for what was once called the Inquisition. If I were not a Jesuit, I would say with some pride that I believe my work was read by the Holy Father himself.

Over 20 years I had several interviews with Curial officials. Each interview followed months or even years of preparatory examination of documents while I waited, mutely, for approval of perhaps a single essay. My only rewards were long lists of required revisions that might, in the future, make my work acceptable for official publication.

During this time I continued my work as a xenotechnoarcheologist. My scientific writing was of no interest to the Church, but, unknown to Rome (and even to myself at first) my scientific work slowly merged with my religious beliefs. In my mid-forties I collected my ideas in a book that was to encompass all my beliefs: *The Spiritual Evolution of Matter: Dust, Man and Beyond.*

A few weeks after my manuscript arrived in Rome, the Congregation of the Faith leveled the specific and serious charge of Unsound Doctrine. *The Spiritual Evolution of Matter* contradicted fundamental Catholic dogma first set forth by Aquinas over a thousand years ago. Saint Thomas said that matter was merely matter and doomed to pass away, while spirit was eternal spirit. Unlike mass and energy—which are equivalent—ephemeral matter can never become eternal spirit. You do have some scientific training, enough to know that matter can be transformed into energy? Good.

This time there were no difficult passages, no suggested sections for revision, no authority was assigned me to help me clarify my thoughts. They simply told me that *The Spiritual Evolution of Matter: Dust, Man and Beyond* was profoundly heretical and could never be published.

If I may digress for a moment, you might be interested to know that I find heresy intriguing. It is a state of grace to which one is summoned. Once appointed a heretic, one's unauthorized thoughts are formally authorized. Unauthorized Thoughts. It is a validation, and like garden weeds, they can never be completely eradicated.

I believe that metaphor is the poetry of reason. Did I mention that before? Well, the human mind is a garden of thought. There are the flowers of human thought: the annuals of art and science, and the perennials of faith. There are weeds, too. But what lies outside the garden wall? Is there only desert, stretching to a hazy horizon, or are there other gardens, alien gardens of thought where we might wander if we only we could find the narrow gate in the wall of our small garden? Perhaps weeds in our garden might be flowers in other, alien gardens? But, in our human garden, my heretical weeds were intolerable and Rome said I must not write.

I am a Jesuit who is sworn to a life of obedience. We who have sworn to obey know that, while God frowns on those who use authority irrationally, He smiles on those of us who irrationally obey. I felt He was smiling on me when, two years later, Rome's lost probe discovered Paschal II.

There was nothing for me here on Earth. I asked to be sent to the new planet. I knew there must be a great secret on a planet protected by an AMF. Unlike other XTA's I had nothing to lose by going to Paschal II. Even if I did not return I would be serving God. If I did discover how to defeat the AMF then I could not only return to Earth, but return in triumph.

And my friend Angstrom, why did he go with me? In my report I don't think I mentioned that Angstrom was the son of a Paris chef. Angstrom had inherited his father's love of food. Through all the years I worked with him he never weighed less than 150 kilos. Arcs of sweat stained the armpits of his shirts and those who worked beside him always breathed the faint smell of stale sweat.

Although his professional peers were disgusted by his obesity they were forced to respect his intellect. At the

end of his career his hunger for truth, not food, led to his professional disgrace and ostracism. But more of that later. All you need to know about Angstrom at this time is that he was a kind man and that the chance of an uncertain quest on Paschal II offered him more than the miserable certainty of his lonely life on Earth.

And what was the purpose of our trip? I think you understand that it was to turn off the AMF and discover the secret that was hidden on Paschal II.

Gloria

I HAVE NEVER ENJOYED SPACE TRAVEL. LIKE MANY things that seem exciting, space travel is quite boring.

We journeyed to Paschal II on a ship I renamed the *Teilhard de Chardin,* after a predecessor of mine. She was an ancient, unsafe faster-than-light freighter owned by one of the Vatican's labyrinthine holding companies. Rome said we could use her because the *Chardin* was on her way to the scrap yard. Do you understand why an unspaceworthy ship was ideal? You don't? Surely you see that I was a certified heretic, forbidden to speak but still capable of thought. I was a constant threat here on Earth. My unfortunate death in space would be a tragic loss that would be quickly forgotten. And if the *Chardin* did not break up in hyperspace, Rome would be pleased to see me marooned on Paschal II behind the impenetrable veil of the AMF. Ah, I can see from the slight inclination of your head that you are no neophyte in the ways of the Vatican. Perhaps you know that the planning for the second, fully-equipped expedition—the one that would be sent when ours unfortunately disappeared—was already underway.

Before we left Earth we had our universal antibody boosters, so that we could drink the water on Paschal II, so to speak. Like us, the three hules had their antibody booster together with a shot of a long-acting anti-gonadotropin to continue the suppression of their self-replicating behavior. When breeding mammalian intelligence in a vat there are some behaviors that apparently cannot be eliminated. In lieu of pharmaceuticals I had my vow of chastity and for Angstrom, well, as far as I know he was functionally asexual.

Why did we take the hules? The hules would be our porters, our bearers. Without machines we would be forced to explore Paschal like 17th century adventurers from Europe's Age of Discovery—those glorious days when scarcely a cape was rounded or a river explored without a Jesuit on board.

For two days we coasted away from Earth's gravitational field. To pass the time I took out the battered brass reflecting telescope given to me by one of my teachers when I was a young man. The stars shown as they do only when seen from space, a myriad suns wheeling through the void. In time each sun would die in a brief nova or rarer supernova, spewing forth gassy clouds of star stuff. Eons later this dust would cool and condense into new suns and planets. On a tiny fraction of these planets liquid water would be squeezed from rock and the long procession of life would begin. Half-alive slime at first, then bacteria refining their cell walls and nuclei for a billion years, then another billion years of microscopic multicellular beings whose progeny, in another billion years or so, would be fish and birds and mammals and creatures like men, with souls.

Be careful. You are listening to dangerous ideas, my young friend.

Did I mention that the three hules were Rome's gift to our expedition? Another example of Rome's threadbare generosity. They were spare agricultural hules from this seminary. Spare hules are a problem: junking them is a difficult moral question. Industry quietly euthanizes them, but the Church is more principled—or more squeamish—and assigns its surplus hules, like aging nuns, to ever lighter duties. These three hules, however, were assigned to our mission to live or die, as God saw fit, marooned with me and Angstrom.

Sedated, the three slept through our five-day journey across the light-years. Sometimes I would check on them as they lay in the narrow bunks on the cargo bay. M. Jules was strong and willing while Mlle. Marie was a delicate creature often found in the company of M. Jules. M. Alain had a truculent air as if he blamed all men not only for being a manufactured mutation but also for being born a slave. Although they had no souls we always addressed them as Monsieur or Mademoiselle. They were more than animals and these honorifics eased the quiet discomfort we felt in their presence.

Asleep in the *Chardin's* cargo bay their shaggy faces were impassive. There was no flicker under their eyelids, no twitching, no soft moaning while they slept. Minutes before our trip through hyperspace Angstrom, hunched over a subunit of the quantum drive in the *Chardin's* engine-room, churlishly snapped at me, "Hules are like other animals; they only seem to dream."

Did I describe Paschal II? I think I told you that this planet was more Earthlike than others found at the time. Like Earth, Paschal even had a single airless moon. From orbit we looked down on the estuary and the clifftop temple. The river's source seemed to lie in lush upland forests which stretched to the edge of a long escarpment. The river plunged over this scarp into lowland jungles where it was a broad brown thing that wound for miles and miles until it reached the sea.

Our descent to the surface was frightful. Angstrom, figuring that a passive airfoil would not trigger the AMF, had built a glider—a mono-wing without moving control

surfaces or other mechanical devices—that was designed to swoop erratically, like a leaf falling from orbit, never flying faster than 200 kilometers per hour.

"No turning back. Let's hope we can turn the damned thing off when we get there," he said. He meant the AMF of course, not the glider. He pulled the red switch to fire the explosive bolts that held us beneath the *Chardin.* There was a muffled thud and we dropped down below the ship. Above us we saw the *Chardin's* shuttlecraft hanging in its bay.

Strapped in, we sat in the darkness, listening to the rush of air and the creaking of the prestressed airframe, feeling nothing but nausea and fear. We were waiting for the sudden cold of the AMF or the crack of a fractured strut, followed by the rush of air as we fell from the shattered glider and plunged to our deaths. Behind us the hules, whom we had wakened earlier so they could stumble to their seats inside the glider, were whining piteously. A sudden stench of vomit told us that one of them had thrown up. For hours we lived with the sound of their retching and with our own fear and swooping vertigo.

We were waiting for the sudden cold of the AMF or the crack of a fractured strut, followed by the rush of air as we fell from the shattered glider and plunged to our deaths. Behind us, the hules were whining piteously.

It was night when we hit the ground a few miles west of the temple. As Angstrom had planned, the force of the crash tore open the fuselage. A hatch would have been useless. Hinges and latches would freeze the moment we tried to use them in the anti-machine field. The glider skidded and tumbled to a halt. Clouds of dust swirled through the torn fuselage and settled on our lips and in our noses. The dust tasted dry and somehow clean.

I clambered out and my boots crunched on sand and gravel. We were on high ground, although alarmingly close to a ravine. I could see the moonlit temple far to the east, beside the dark ocean. A black lake filled a crater down the slope below me; ill-formed mountains rose behind us. The whole landscape was elusively evocative. I breathed in the cool night air and remembered my boyhood in the Auvergne. Perhaps Paschal's spectral landscape reminded me of those gaunt hills where my father took me to hear country folk tell tales of mystical quests in which the hero returned with his Holy Grail. When I was older I realized that the hero was always subtly wounded by his quest.

The cooling glider ticked and creaked. Angstrom squeezed his bulk through the hole in the fuselage. He was wearing his old safari jacket with its many pockets for tools and gadgets. I wondered what he planned to put in his pockets here on Paschal. Always the scientist, he walked around the glider examining its mono-wing to see how his design had withstood its single swooping flight. He touched the wing's leading edge but quickly drew back his finger and sucked its tip.

He grabbed a crowbar from the darkness inside the fuselage and jammed one end underneath a rock. Putting his shoulder to the crowbar he heaved for a second. The bar snapped abruptly and Angstrom staggered into the rock. At his feet the two halves of the bar were already covered with hoar frost and the metal crumbled to an icy dust.

"So much for the lever," he said. He pulled a threaded bolt from his pocket. "Let's try the screw." He spun a nut onto the bolt but after a turn or two the nut froze to the bolt and he dropped the combination onto the sand and sucked the ice from his fingertips. "Screw's out. That means the inclined plane and the wedge won't work. This AMF's the same as all the others. Even Archimedes' simple machines malfunction, let alone anything more complicated."

Our own bodies were full of mechanical devices, muscles, tendon, joints but alien tech was not triggered by the device itself. The tech was triggered by the mind's intent to move inanimate matter and use it as a tool. A tool, you see, is a marriage of matter and spirit—the motion of the material substance of the tool and the mind's purposeful intent.

We clambered back inside the pungent darkness of the fuselage to help the hules stagger onto the sand. They mewled and chittered to one another. Were they afraid, or surprised? Who could tell? They were restless, sniffing the air and peering at their strange new surroundings. I said that as long as they were occupied they would be fine.

When our food and other supplies—clothing, ropes, my Bible and other priestly apparatus—had been stuffed into the packs, I showed the hules how to adjust the friction buckles on the shoulder-straps. I mention the buckles to show you how we had planned our expedition. Experience had shown that other AMF's had no effect on static friction. We rejected the usual buckles with its little tongue poking through a hole in the strap and chose only buckles with no moving parts.

The hules staggered off into the gray half-light. Angstrom led them and M. Jules followed. The other two shambled along behind in single file. Their shapeless coveralls made them look aimless.

I went over to the broken glider and checked to see that the remote control that would bring the shuttlecraft down from orbit was still stuffed in its pocket on the cockpit

bulkhead. Satisfied, I followed the others towards the temple. By the time I caught up with them the sun was rising over the eastern ocean.

In mid-morning we were crossing a broad savanna. Herds of winged para-deer were grazing on the dry grass. (XTA's aren't interested in naming species—we just add the prefix *para-* to the name of whatever Earth animal fits best.) Once, in the distance, we saw a horned, striped predator bring down a bounding herbivore and tear its belly open. The hules sniffed anxiously. I suppose the scent of blood was borne to them on the wind. Angstrom stopped to watch. "Do you think we count as prey?

I picked up a stone and hefted it in my hand, thinking about the hules and how to defend them if a para-tiger should attack. The rock suddenly became as cold as ice—no, much colder—in my hand. I dropped it before my skin froze and said, "Not much we can do about if we are."

We approached the temple in mid-afternoon and faced a long climb up a curving stairway to the clifftop terrace. The height and width of each step was different, typical of alien architecture. Some scholars said the aliens valued diversity above all else but, I asked myself, how could anyone know what the aliens valued? Even the concept of value might be too human.

Cautiously Angstrom put his foot on the first step. He waited and the sweat soaked slowly through the back of his safari jacket. Nothing else seemed to happen. We pressed on and reached the top, panting, 15 minutes later. Once again we waited on the last step, monitoring ourselves for change. A worn balustrade which marked the edge of the terrace curved away in the distance at the very edge of the cliff. The wind that ruffled our hair smelled of ozone and tasted slightly salty.

We stepped onto the terrace. The first few white flagstones were tilted, cracked and worn with age, but after a few more steps the stones under our feet met perfectly. This was as we had expected; the temple was protected by a preservation field. These fields, using some mysterious stored energy, collapsed slowly—a few inches every century—and peripheral decay like this was found at many otherwise perfectly-preserved alien sites.

We headed toward the temple. The white dome shone in the sunshine, its ellipsoidal surface resting on columns that had the thin strength of wineglass stems. Most alien structures are based on this pseudo-conic geometry—ellipsoidal or parabolic surfaces, often with negative curvature—that defy conventional mathematical analysis. Angstrom and I approached slowly. The hules lagged behind, sniffing the sea breeze.

Inside the temple there was a shimmering translucent sphere, perhaps 20 meters in diameter floating two meters off the ground. The surface of the sphere trembled in the breeze as if it were alive.

We circled the sphere once but learned nothing. Angstrom put his finger out and touched it. He pulled his finger back, looked at me, and said "Try it."

I touched the sphere. The surface was cool—but there was no surface! My finger sank into the substance of the sphere and was surrounded by coolness. Ripples spread across the curvature above my head. I pulled my finger out. My finger was unharmed.

"Amazing," said Angstrom. "If only we knew… if only we knew what it was for, how it floats, had even a glimpse of how it works." But another hour spent in the temple taught us nothing. It was another alien enigma, wonderful, yet completely frustrating. We withdrew to think about what we had seen. At least we had not triggered any untoward effects.

The hules had wandered away to the balustrade looking over the ocean. I called to them. At the western edge of the terrace, away from the ocean, we found shelter from the sea breeze in a clump of trees.

Living in the Vatican, you have probably never realized that you must have tools to start a fire. In the AMF there would be no camp fires to cook our food or warm us in the night. I was not looking forward to eating our rations cold and sleeping, wrapped in our blankets, in the open, but to my surprise Angstrom gathered dry grass, leaves and twigs and piled them in a small pyramid.

"An experiment," he said. From the pocket of his safari jacket he pulled a magnifying glass. There was still some warmth in the sunlight and in two minutes he had created a tiny flame that licked at the tendrils of dry vegetation. "Passive, like the drop of dew that focuses the morning sun to start a forest fire," he said. The hules eyed the fire from a distance. They were wary, uneasy. In their secluded lives in the seminary garden I don't think they had ever seen a naked flame.

I brought water from the river for us to drink. We men ate with our hands while the hules set their bowls on the ground and lapped noisily. They seemed more comfortable with their dining arrangements than Angstrom or I.

The moon had risen and we settled down for sleep, the hules huddling close to us like dogs at a hunters' camp. I was tired after the exertion of the day and was already half-asleep when I heard one of the hules get up. It was M. Jules. He padded down to the edge of the river, to drink I thought. The moon was shining across the smooth water. He looked up at the moon and threw his head back so that the tendons in his neck stood out in taut relief. He howled. It was a mournful, lonely sound that faded away across the water, rising through the air towards the moon. There was no answer.

I had never heard a hule make a noise like this before. Picking their way quietly across the grass and rocks, Mlle. Marie and M. Alain joined him at the water's edge.

Mlle. Marie threw back her head and howled with him. Their bestial song was a poignant duet, raw yet beautiful. M. Alain added his bass. The cool night wind carried their bestial fugue across the water. Were they homesick? Did they know that their quiet seminary garden was 50 light-years away, orbiting a faint star in the night sky overhead? When they had spent their crude emotions they shambled back to camp and lay down again.

Unsettled, I felt a need for solitude and prayer. I walked to the eastern edge of the terrace and leaned over the balustrade to look down on the estuary and the dark ocean. Waves crashed against the foot of the cliff and once again I tasted the salty ocean spray.

I stood there for a long time while Paschal's unfamiliar constellations rose from the eastern ocean and climbed into the sky. Filled with a sense of peace I turned to look back at the temple where the rising stars were reflected on the surface of the sphere. I was surprised to discover that I simply knew, without the slow steps of reason, that the sphere was a lens and the temple was a lighthouse that swept its invisible beam across the miles of ocean and the light-years of the starry void beyond. Thrilled, I understood that this beam had found and lured Rome's missing probe to Paschal.

Do you remember? I told you I would tell you how the probe found Paschal. Are you still comfortable? Good. Look down there on the flagstones at our feet—do you see how the sun shines through what hair I have, making a halo of light around the shadow of my head. Did you now that the word "halo" comes from the Greek? Halo means threshing floor, where the wheat is garnered and the chaff rejected. Strange, how we religious acquire useless knowledge. The evening air is not too chill? Good.

Suddenly and without any effort on my part, I knew that the temple lens was made of water because, on Paschal II, the alien tech was in the water of the world, hidden in the rivers and the rains and the salty ocean spray that caked my lips.

The next morning Angstrom asked, "If the sphere is a lighthouse, does it mark a safe harbor for travelers across the light-years or does it mark a hidden danger that will destroy us all?"

"It marks the river," I said. "Safe or dangerous, the end of our quest lies at the source of the river."

The river was wide, brown and slow. A few miles upstream we entered a densely canopied climax forest. Raucous creatures with bulbous eyes and more than four legs shrieked at us from the treetops. Thick suckers descended from the canopy and, where they touched the ground, grew roots and bark until they were indistinguishable from upthrusting trunks. The light that reached us was filtered through many translucent leafy layers 50 meters above our heads. When the gentle winds of Paschal II tousled the treetops the dappled shadows ebbed and flowed at our feet. Walking through these green shadows was like walking underwater and we walked for many days like this, with the brown river on our right and the green jungle on our left.

Building a boat was always an idea but proved impossible without tools. Even a raft of logs lashed together with the rope from our packs was beyond us. We had no way to cut down trees or trim them to size.

Building a boat was always an idea but proved impossible without tools. Even a raft of logs lashed together with the rope from our packs was beyond us. We had no way to cut down trees or trim them to size. Besides, the AMF would have destroyed the oars or poles we would need to navigate.

One morning I found the hules eating fruit from the trees. I was too late to stop them. I watched them anxiously for the rest of the day. If they sickened we could not continue upriver because Angstrom and I could carry only enough food for a few days. As the day wore on it seemed that the fruit had done them no harm.

Each day we rose at dawn, walked until mid-afternoon, and camped. On a good day we walked 20 kilometers. After a month our clothes were torn and ragged, our hair shaggy and our beards unkempt, but we were tanned and fit and Angstrom had lost perhaps 20 kilograms.

The insects, of which there were innumerable species, were more like flying reptiles than chitinous beetles. They did not bother us, nor did the larger animals that stalked their prey in that jungle. At night we sometimes heard some victim scream.

"It's as if we are invisible," said Angstrom as we lay by the fire one evening.

"We are. But is Paschal protecting or ignoring us?" I wondered.

Did I mention earlier that metaphor is the poetry of reason? I did? Good. Well, I told Angstrom a story from the life of a Jesuit priest whose biography I had read. He was a missionary in 21st century Africa who spent his life at the intersection of Christianity, Islam, and Animism. Ministering to the wounded during one of the cruel and petty wars of those times, he witnessed a young woman leading a ragtag army dressed in tattered fatigues. They were following her down a dirt road toward the enemy. The woman was naked and walked backward. She held a

mirror before her face to look over her shoulder and study the road as she walked.

A young mercenary, toying with the safety catch of his automatic weapon, told the priest, "Because she is naked and does not look at the enemy with her own eyes, they cannot see her. She is invisible." The woman stepped on a land mine and there was nothing left but bloodstains in the dust.

We religious see things few others see.

For example, I have seen the Tower of Echo, a windy tower in the wall of an alien city. At the top of the tower, accessible only by a winding stair, is an open space looking over the ruined city and the lonely desert that surrounds it. There was an inconsistent echo in that windy openness where there should have been no echo.

Inconsistent? Yes. The strength of the echo varied with… well, it varied with the truth of what was said. Mathematical theorems echoed well, but some better than others, which is strange. Echoes of Mozart's music were very strong while Brahms' echoes were much quieter—I discovered that myself. Deliberate misstatement—two and two are three—would generate no returning sound at all.

We were very careful. Alien tech is dangerous. We assume that a mistake by one of the XTA's investigating Pius III collapsed the whole asteroid into a pinhole-sized black hole. The entire team was lost. For all we knew, the wrong statement in the windy Tower of Echo might turn off the tech, or worse. As always, everything we did received prior clearance from the Vatican.

I suggested to my superior that we might ask some more complex statements including some which Rome felt were untrue. I suggested, for example, that we say, "Matter slowly evolves into spirit." Unfortunately, further investigation was suspended, perhaps on orders from the Holy Father himself, and we were ordered home because, "We do not understand the workings of alien tech and have no assurance that the tower is a machine for determining the truth. Its purpose is unknown and may be only to deceive."

The night before we left I wondered if I should go back to the tower one last time and make statements from my own work, and perhaps other statements such as, "God made man in his own image." I also thought about saying, "Jesus Christ was the Son of God," just to see what happened.

The Tower of Echo—a machine that knew beauty and material truth, and perhaps spiritual truth as well—is the best example of how alien tech blends the principles of physics and metaphysics, bringing together the worlds of matter and of spirit. I must admit I was very tempted to test the dogma of Aquinas.

We walked upstream six days a week and rested on Sundays when I said Mass for Angstrom, opening the little sack of communion wafers I had brought from Earth. For wine I blessed water from the river. Canon Law requires at least one worshipper at Mass. You might wonder if Canon Law applies 50 light-years away from Earth, but the answer to that is simple. Canon Law applies wherever there are Catholics. The hules watched us idly, scratching and sniffing at one another while we prayed. Their animal behavior distracted me. Dogs sniffing at each other would not have offended me but I realized that I wanted the hules to pay attention. I found it hard to believe that matter would ever evolve into spirit when the hules licked their genitals while I was saying mass. I told Angstrom while I was putting away the wafers, "I know this is wrong, but sometimes the hules disgust me."

"Perhaps you should teach them to pray," he replied. I don't think he was serious.

They started sleeping on the other side of the fire from Angstrom and me. I wondered if they had understood my remark, but that was impossible.

The hules did start to give us more serious trouble. M. Alain developed a nasty habit of loosening the buckles on the straps of his pack. I never caught him at it but several times a day his pack would fall from his shoulders. I was sure he was trying to quietly lose his burden so I tied the straps in place. Somehow he learned to untie the knots and would let the pack fall from his shoulders when I was least expecting it. Angrily, I would retie the straps and, with luck, he would leave them alone for a few more hours.

The hules' animal behavior distracted me. Dogs would not have offended me but I realized that I wanted the hules to pay attention. I found it hard to believe that matter would ever evolve into spirit when the hules licked their genitals while I was saying mass.

One evening I caught the hules eating the communion wafers from my pack. M. Alain had the sack in his hands and was munching the last wafer. The other two had crumbs on their shaggy faces. I snatched the empty bag from his hands. "Get out of here," I yelled, shaking the bag at them as if I were exorcising devils. They slunk away like chastised dogs. After a few moments I felt calmer. I had remembered that hules could be guilty of an action, but were always innocent of motive.

Credo

WHAT WAS THE JOURNEY LIKE? WHAT DID WE FEEL? DID I miss Earth, my Jesuit brethren and my scholarly friends?

Yes, I did miss their companionship. Did I worry that we might not find the source of the AMF, or be unable to extinguish the field? Yes, but strangely, I did not worry much. For the most part I was simply content.

Angstrom was good company. At the end of the day's journey he would light our fire with his magnifying glass and when darkness fell we would talk by the fire, lying under the strange stars of that alien sky.

"What is your thesis?" he asked me one night. "By thesis, I mean what is the central idea from which all your thought stems?"

Thoughtfully, I replied, "When I was five I sat by the fire the first time my mother cut my hair. She cut off a lock and threw it into the flames. It curled and burned and was gone. I saw how fragile I was and how easily the stuff of my body could disappear. The next day I buried a heavy old key in the garden, seeking to prove to myself that at least some things were permanent. Later I dug and I dug but I could never find it. These two events bothered me greatly and, in some sense, helped me decide to become a priest. I desperately wanted to enter the world of the spirit, you see, for the tenuous insubstantial world of the spirit is the world that endures."

"And your journey to Paschal?" asked Angstrom.

"We humans explore the material world using reason as our tool," I said. "We observe, experiment, question, hypothesize, refute and refine our ideas. But in the spiritual world our tool is faith. Experimentation is expressly forbidden and, by definition, dogma cannot be refuted by reason. In defiance of this separation, my thesis is that the material world of reason and the spiritual world of faith are frail human interpretations of a single deep reality."

"We explore the material world using reason as our tool," I said. "But in the spiritual world our tool is faith. Experimentation is expressly forbidden and, by definition, dogma cannot be refuted by reason."

Trained in theology, you know that this dichotomy between reason and faith pervades our Christian thought, and all our science too. But the aliens did not think in terms of reason or faith. Their machines used both physics and metaphysics. Did I mention the Tower of Echo? Yes, I remember that I did. But I can see you look shocked. I told you I was a heretic, sometimes subtle, but sometimes more brash. Sit back on your bench while I finish my story. You can always say your prayers later, when I am done.

As for Angstrom, he had his own thesis. He said, "Like you, I came to Paschal to answer a question. Like you, I work with an impossible dichotomy, but mine is one of waves and particles, momentum and position, the EPR paradox. Yet this quantum dichotomy works. Quantum gravitational engines lifted the battered *Chardin* across 50 light-years but quantum theory makes no sense. Behind the impossibilities must be a better, more complete, truth. Perhaps alien minds have different logics that resolve these problems."

"A truth you will find here on Paschal?" I asked.

"I hope I will. Alien machines manipulate time and space in clever ways. Human minds scarcely know what is happening, let alone how it happens."

Much of Angstrom's career was spent in advancing his thesis of alternate logics which was, of course, ridiculed by his peers. I remember Angstrom standing at the podium before an audience of five hundred skeptics at a meeting of the American Academy of Xeno-Technoarcheology in New York. The lights were bright for the video cameras and the sweat shone on his bald head. After he had finished his presentation, the first question from the audience was, "Are you really proposing the existence of a logic which is illogical to human minds, yet logical to other minds, and though illogical, yields conclusions that are correct?" The questioner was a confident young man who smelled blood and was eager to impress his professors. He was from what they call in America an Ivy League school. There was some laughter which the questioner allowed the audience time to enjoy before he added, "Perhaps you used this new logic to write your paper. That would explain a great deal."

Angstrom seized the edges of the podium in his gigantic hands and started to reply but his words were lost on the scientists all jostling for the exits.

After this, the sweating, malodorous, iconoclastic Angstrom became as welcome at scientific gatherings as Martin Luther at the Vatican. His papers, unwanted in the editorial offices of the journals of our field, were sent to his harshest critics for peer review.

When my book was rejected by the Curia, Angstrom still had his tenured position—in Quebec, I think it was. But by the time of the discovery of Paschal II his whole department had been eliminated. A purely financial decision, he was told, and nothing to do with the fact that this was the only way to fire a tenured full professor. At 50 years of age, with no family, friends or professional future, Paschal II was as good a destination for Angstrom as it was for me.

"Is professional vindication so important? I asked.

"No, but truth is," he said, and rolled over to sleep. The way he pulled his blanket over his shoulder made me

think he was comforted by the discovery that we were following paths more similar than we had thought.

I was less certain. I lay in the dark, thinking of the Tower of Echo. The Roman poet Virgil wrote that bees were killed by echoes. (Those of us with time on our hands acquire arcane information. It is an occupational hazard of the priesthood.) Eighteen hundred years later Gilbert White, an English curate who was well-versed in Virgil and an excellent diarist, wrote that he spent a summer afternoon bending over his hives, shouting into a speaking trumpet to see if his bees would die.

Have I have already mentioned my love of metaphor?

Sanctus

THE NEXT DAY WE CAME TO THE FALLS. THE RIVER poured over the escarpment, which was a steep, rocky cliff 200 meters high. We chose to climb close to the edge of the falls where winter floods had torn slabs of rock from the wall, affording an array of ledges and handholds. I said a brief prayer and started to climb. I planned to throw down a rope for the hules to climb. Angstrom would come last. Although he had lost weight steadily on Paschal, I thought I might have to use the hules to pull him up the cliff.

The rock was wet with spray and slippery with the green slime of algal life. I climbed for an hour, soaked, with my hair plastered to my head. I resting every few minutes by jamming my boots with their serrated soles onto some narrow ledge. Irritatingly, my laces became untied while I was climbing and no sooner had I retied one than the other came loose. When I looked down—which out of fear I did not do very often—I could see the four figures growing smaller far below, until they were tiny foreshortened dolls standing beside the churning whiteness at the bottom of the falls. The roar of the water drowned my shouted attempts to reassure them. My arms and shoulders, thighs and calves began to tremble until I scrambled over the top, dropped my pack to the ground and flopped down on the wet rocks like a landed fish.

When I got my breath I carefully knotted two lengths of rope together, tied one end to a tree that was firmly rooted between the flat rocks beside the river, and threw the other end over the edge. It was a black thing, snaking as it fell through the mist. Angstrom ran to it and I felt his tug. He handed the rope to one of the hules.

The hule climbed slowly, sensing the great danger. After 50 meters or so the hule's pack came loose. The pack swung by one strap. "Lord," I muttered. "Why didn't Angstrom check the knots?"

The pack swung away from the hule's shoulder, the second strap came loose and the pack fell away, tumbling through the spray down into the surging foam. Angstrom waved his arms at me as if to warn me.

The hule continued to climb. I watched his swinging movement, arm-over-arm, very ape-like, and when he was almost halfway up the cliff, just below the knot, I saw that the hule was M. Alain. As he reached for the knot, he fell.

At first I thought the rope had broken but then I realized that my elaborate knot had come undone. M. Alain fell away from the cliff with the loose rope twisting through the air around him like a black snake falling with him into the whiteness. He tumbled into the heart of the maelstrom at the bottom of the falls. I saw his head briefly bobbing in the surge and he was gone.

Angstrom and the other two hules waited for a long time, searching for M. Alain's body along the bank. In the late afternoon they all climbed up the falls, the hules following what was left of my scent on the wet rocks while Angstrom, who turned out to be an agile climber, urged them on from behind. It was evening when they reached the top and the sun was too low to light a fire. M. Jules kept looking down over the falls. Mlle. Marie crawled under a bush and curled up like a fetus.

"Maybe you should say a short requiem for him," said Angstrom.

"I can't do that for a hule. He had no soul."

"The other two might feel better if you did. Who's going to know? It's 50 light years from here to Rome."

But Canon Law applies wherever there are Catholics so I read some comforting words in a ceremonial way, a pseudo-service of no deeper significance.

We ate cold rations and settled down for a miserable night in the woods, shivering in our damp clothing.

I will always be grateful to Angstrom for saying nothing that night about my carelessness with the knot. I walked away from our camp to pray for forgiveness for my carelessness. Only those familiar with the confessional will understand the anguish this burden caused because I had no confessor.

I woke early and lay quietly in that stillness that comes at the end of the night. Here above the falls the forest canopy was lower and less dense and there were scattered grassy clearings. The raucous monkey birds were absent, but there were many new varieties of flying creatures, para-butterflies flapping their iridescent blue-green wings, warbling songs that were pleasing to my ears.

I dressed quietly but my laces would not stay tied. After the third attempt Angstrom, who was lying on his side watching me through half-closed eyes, said, "I think you're wasting your time. Above the falls we are closer to the AMF's source. We must have entered a region where mechanical friction is neutralized. Your lace relies on friction. Above the falls, knots are machines."

He was right. For days, M. Alain's truculent mind must have been more sensitive to the AMF. I was still

responsible for his death, not through carelessness, but through blind stupidity, which was worse.

I set my boots aside. The friction buckles on our packs were useless and we could not tie the straps in place. The buttons on our torn clothes were also useless. We were forced to leave our packs behind, with all our supplies and food. I wrapped my books carefully, hoping to recover them on the return journey.

Our pace was slow because our soles were sensitive. A mile or two later, while we were climbing over some boulders, Angstrom's magnifying glass fell from his pocket and was smashed to pieces on a rock. The bottom seam of his pocket had unraveled.

"Sewing, weaving—they both rely on friction."

As we walked upstream all our seams were unraveling. The hules' coveralls hung in tatters and by lunchtime our clothing had literally fallen off our backs. Angstrom's white flesh wobbled on his body but the hules moved with a certain muscular grace I hadn't noticed before. Without the magnifying glass we could not light a fire that night and so we slept on beds of dry leaves that were still warm from the afternoon sun.

In this manner, naked, we wandered for days through this idyllic landscape, always staying close to the river. We ate fruits from the trees and I could see the fat was shrinking on Angstrom's flaccid body. At first I felt a certain shame about our nakedness. After all, I was a celibate priest. But as time passed I became comfortable with our situation.

At one time we walked for several days through grassy glades filled with wildflowers. Sometimes the stream (for that was what the river had become) widened and we would bathe our brown bodies in a warm pool. On other days the rain would wash the sweat and the dirt from our skins.

M. Jules and Mlle. Marie would wander off for hours and when they returned there was a certain glow about them. You might think they were sneaking off, but that is not the case. They just wandered off as if, like animals, they could do exactly as they pleased. Of course, now that we had no packs, there was no work for them to do. We were still their masters but we had no commands to give them. They spent more and more time by themselves. I suppose when they wanted to come back to us they could track us by our scent.

Angstrom and I, naked, with our hair uncombed and beards long, looked much like the hules. We wandered together through the dappled woods, eating when we were hungry, and resting when we were tired. We walked quietly, each with our own thoughts. Like the hules, we no longer had any tasks.

Above the falls our thought was clearer. "You are looking for a single truth that lies behind the dichotomy of careful reason and dogmatic faith," said Angstrom. "I am looking for a single truth that lies behind the dichotomy of quantum mechanics. The single truths we seek might be the same truth."

He was right. As soon as he spoke the idea seemed quite obvious. "Alien tech blends physics and metaphysics, spirit and matter," I said. "Behind the apparent dual nature of matter, behind the apparent dual nature of thought, there is a single fundamental truth. Alien tech is built on that truth. That truth is the secret the aliens hid here on Paschal and why they set their beacon to mark the hiding place."

The river had become much narrower. Inexplicably, the hules began to make fewer forays into the woods. One afternoon we came to the source of the river. A spring flowed from the base of a large rock into a pool. The water was quite clear and there was nothing at the bottom but a jumble of stones.

I knelt at the edge and dipped my hands into the water. Ripples spread across its still surface. I cupped my hands and lifted them. The water ran between my fingers and splashed and tinkled back into the pool.

The hules were watching carefully, waiting to see what we would do.

"You drink first," said Angstrom.

Once again I dipped my cupped hands into the pool and this time I lifted the water to my lips. The water was cold and refreshing.

I felt unchanged, at first.

Angstrom was looking at me, taut with curiosity.

"Drink," I said. "See for yourself."

He knelt beside me, bowed his head to the surface of the water and lapped at the water like an animal. When he straightened up he did not wipe the water from his lips and chin and it fell to the ground in shining droplets.

"Yes," he said, slowly. "I see."

Like me, he did not say what it was he saw. But I think he saw logics that were not human, ways of reasoning that were surprising and completely alien, hinting at larger truths than we had known before.

We sat in the shade of a small copse close to the pool.

"The temple is a library," I said.

We sat in silence for several minutes, inspecting the contents of our minds. Do not think we had experienced a transformation. Nothing was that simple. The best I can do is to tell you that we had been granted the potential for transforming ourselves, but the complete task assigned to us would require great effort and take many years.

The idea of transformation captivates me. I have come to realize that a man who truly transforms himself acquires the mysterious ability to help others transform themselves. Would you agree? I think any student of religion must.

We did know some new things that suddenly seemed quite obvious. "We can turn off the AMF any time we want," said Angstrom.

"I know."

Like all alien tech, the trigger was intent. To turn it off, all we had to do was *not* to want to turn it off. I thought about this for a moment and rose to my feet, picked up a dead tree limb lying on the ground, put one end under a rock and levered the boulder from its resting place. Dozens of dull black insects scuttled away in the sudden sunlight, leaving behind hundreds of glistening eggs. I examined the stick. There was no frost on the branch, no brittle cracking of the gnarled wood, and my hands were still warm. I looked back at Angstrom and saw, behind him, the hules kneeling side by side and drinking from the pool, lapping noisily.

They raised their heads and looked back at us. The water was running from their snouts and their faces were impassive. They turned back to the water and drank again. M. Jules stood up and stared at us boldly, curiously. Mlle. Marie dipped her finger in the pool, walked to me and stood before me, her hand held before me, finger pointing down. A shining droplet hung from the end of her finger.

"Kneel down. Open your mouth," said Angstrom, hoarsely.

I opened my mouth. She held her wet fingertip over my waiting tongue. A single drop fell into my mouth. I swallowed.

The hules turned away and walked into the darkening woods. In a moment they had vanished between the trees.

Agnus Dei

THE NEXT MORNING ANGSTROM AND I BEGAN OUR journey downstream to the falls.

The time after a climactic event is like the period of slack water after a high tide; all the work is done, there is no place for purposeful motion. During the days we traveled back to the falls Angstrom and I found it was thought, not motion, that was redundant.

At the top of the falls I untied the rope from the tree and wrapped it around my shoulder. After we climbed down beside the torrent we built a raft of driftwood bound with rope and we floated away on the slow-moving current.

On one of the many evenings that we lay on our backs, drifting downstream under the stars, Angstrom said, "If the aliens had a purpose, then what is the purpose of Paschal?"

"It is a beacon," I said.

"Marking a vast store of knowledge?"

"Yes, a font of knowledge. But there is more. Paschal is an evolutionary incubator, a machine for arresting the material evolution of matter and accelerating its evolution into spirit. What we have seen is the evolution of evolution."

"But why the AMF?"

"To strip away the objects and the thoughts that we have made that make us what we are. Only when we have shed our manufactured burdens may we pass through the single narrow gate in our own garden wall and wander into other gardens."

Angstrom stayed behind at the temple where the knowledge of an ancient race was stored in a drop of water. He was eager to squeeze his frame through the narrow gate.

On my way back to the glider's crash site I thought of a Van Gogh painting called *The Drinkers.* A copy hangs on the wall of my whitewashed room. By the way, Van Gogh was said to be mad, but I doubt that. Four figures, a child, a youth, a middle-aged man and an old man, stand around a table and drink from a single pitcher. The child drinks milk, the youth water, the middle-aged man coffee and the old man wine, all from that single magical pitcher. Van Gogh's figures crackle with energy in their desperate attempts to slake their various thirsts. As I said, I doubt that Van Gogh was mad.

I returned to the crash site of the glider, slid the remote control from its pocket in the bulkhead and summoned the shuttlecraft down from the belly of the empty *Chardin.* Rome was surprised at my return. After all, the arrival in Earth orbit of a naked priest, bearded, long-haired, tanned and seemingly incoherent, is not a common event.

No one believed my story, of course. I half hoped they might see me as a prophet coming out of the wilderness, but they sent me back to this seminary and gave me easy work to do, as if I were an old nun. Obediently, I have done as my order wished. I have kept my peace and worked here quietly, thinking, making dreams. Twenty summers and three popes have come and gone and I am still working on the tasks assigned to me. All of them.

But the evening grows chill around us, the wooden bench you sit on is quite hard, and we must conclude our business. You have listened to my story and now I must answer your question.

Ah, do not speak yet. Did I not tell you I know what you came to ask?

There can be only one reason that the Holy Father has sent you here to question me in this peaceful garden. Something has happened, something quite unexpected. The Holy Father has received a message and he thinks it came from Paschal II.

Perhaps a passing freighter picked up a signal and relayed it to Rome, or perhaps a subspace message from the planet was received directly by a Vatican antenna at Castel Gandolfo, high in the Apennines. Not so. I know

the message came in a dream. Yes, the Holy Father dreamed so vividly that he could not ignore his dream.

What is so surprising about the idea of the pope receiving a dream? After all, the Bible says that God spoke to many men through their dreams.

Have you ever noticed that dreams are much more powerful at the turning of the seasons? We religious have time to take note of subtle things like that.

So who sent the message? You probably think it was sent by the hules, or by their children who must have developed in unimaginable ways while they were growing up on Paschal? Or was the message from Angstrom, offering alien truth in place of human knowledge? Let me assure you that neither Angstrom, nor the hules—nor the aliens, if that is what you are wondering—have any interest in talking to the Holy Father.

He does not know who sent the message.

But I do, even though the dream he received was an unsigned invitation. The Holy Father has been asked to visit Paschal II. He feels he has been summoned. He wonders if he should think of the journey as a pilgrimage. He worries that the message may not be an invitation, but a false temptation sent by Satan.

The Holy Father wants to know if he should go. He is young and accustomed to dealing with facts, not dreams. After all, he is a scientist, a biologist of some renown, I hear. Weren't you surprised that a scientist, a biologist, a student of evolution, should be elected pope?

I wonder how *that* happened.

No matter. Here is my answer to his question: When he makes this pilgrimage he must remember the folk stories of the Auvergne.

You think that is no answer? I would have thought that you, a clever official of the Vatican, would have enjoyed my indirect response! Allow me to elaborate.

Like a folk hero of the Auvergne, when the Holy Father returns from Paschal he will be changed, and subtly wounded. Now do you understand?

What will this do to the world? Well, I have good reason to be certain that Aquinas was completely wrong. (You are right in your suspicion—before my trip to Paschal my obedience was not always perfect.) The Holy Father will return from Paschal with a radiant union of faith and reason which will wound the world.

Now do you understand?

Good. Why don't you sit here in the quiet darkness, in this arbor at the very end of this path of worn gray stones, and think about what I have said?

I must excuse myself and go to bed. Today was the last day of the summer and in the morning I must rise early to my work. In the new season I will be very busy pruning, cutting away dead growth, and tearing out old unwanted vegetation by the roots. Later I will be planting deep in the earth so that new flowers will flourish in the spring. After all, this is a big garden and the Holy Father might like to know that, quite recently, I have become the gardener.

JIM COWAN jimcowan@delphi.com

Has been an electrical engineer, high-school physics teacher, physician and health-care executive and is convinced that the right job for him is out there somewhere. He is amazed and delighted that many wonderful things in the world can be completely described by mathematics and he is equally amazed and delighted that many wonderful things, including mathematics, cannot. While struggling with this paradox he lives in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

THE MONKEY TRAP

BY KYLE CASSIDY

• A cage is still a cage, even if you can't see the bars. •

CRAZY PEOPLE. THERE'S CRAZY PEOPLE AND DYING mice in the zoo today. I see the crazy people milling about outside, preparing for the big race which starts in the zoo, continues down Zoo Avenue and ends somewhere in L'Harris Park. These people are wearing black and pink spandex. Their wives or husbands are holding the cellular phones, beepers, and laptops. They huddle in the cold along the sidelines.

I see the mouse when I go into the monkey house and close the door behind me. Michelle is already in there, wiping marmoset footprints from the glass with a squeegee—an operation of pointless repetition. The mouse, in misery with broken legs, seems prophetic. It lies in the crack of the windowsill, trying to hide itself behind the packet of roach poision, dragging its hind legs. One of our vicious little primates has bitten through its spine.

THE MONKEY TRAP

The monkeys pound at the glass, furious over its escape. The tiny faces of the golden lion-headed tamarins are vestibules of rage. Their open, screaming mouths are filled with tiny needle-fangs; their voices are piercing squeaks. I point the mouse out to Michelle and she tosses it into the trash can like an orange rind. I frown and wonder if it hurts to be flung onto a pile of straw and monkey shit when you have a broken spine.

"If you can't stand death," she says, climbing into the marmoset exhibit, "get out of the zoo." She throws the squeegee into a bucket and bangs a pan of Purina Monkey Chow and cut fruit into the cage before closing the door. The primates chatter and gibber.

"How's your life?" I ask. Michelle's got a new boyfriend in Baltimore.

"Boring as hell," she says, ignoring the animals leaping around behind her. "When you turn 28, your life gets boring." She opens another cage and I sit down on the floor against the wall.

The tamarins won't touch the apple that she has hung in their cage from a string.

"They think it's a trap," she says. "The last time they saw food on a string they were in the jungle."

The marmosets swarm over their apple, taking tiny wedges out of it like a school of piranhas. But the tamarins stare at theirs like cave men looking at an automobile engine. They rush it, yammer loudly, and run away.

"You either eat the apple, or you don't," she says to the tamarins. "It's not a trap."

"Anymore," I say.

"What?"

"It's too late for them to realize that it's a trap or it's not a trap. It doesn't matter anymore. They can't get any more trapped, but they can't get back either. It doesn't matter."

"They have these monkey traps," says Michelle, looking into the exhibit. "It's like some food in a jar attached to a tree, and the dumb bastards'll stick their hand in the jar and grab the food, but when they make a fist, they can't get their hand out of the jar. They're stuck as long as they're holding onto the food, and they're too stupid to let go of it. You can catch them like that." She throws a handful of grapes through the partially opened window, closes it, and locks it.

"Stupid, aren't you?" she says to the tamarins. They hang back at the top of their cage.

Michelle puts the squeegee and bucket away. She hoses down the floor, which is awash in dead and dying crickets. The crickets are escaped monkey treats that have eaten the roach poision. I wonder how many poisoned roaches the monkeys eat.

We shall always be the victors. The ones we don't want, we kill. The ones we do want, we put in a cage.They will be the representative sample of the ones that we kill.

Michelle and I walk outside. The race has started, and the stampede of DuPont-employed, health-minded yuppie Delawarians are running down Monkey Hill in the DuPont-Wilmington 5K Run For Charity.

We shall always be the victors. The ones we don't want, we kill. The ones we do want, we put in a cage.They will be the representative sample of the ones that we kill.

They run past the background of their parked BMW's. The sprinters come first, down the cobblestones, following the cop on his loud black-and-white Harley Davidson. Then come the runners, lean and old and taunt. Then the joggers: the careless men in round glasses pushing flourescent, aerodynamic three-wheeled baby carriages with hydraulic shock absorbers, the women in need of sports bras, carrying their walkmen, listening to Paul Simon or George Michael. Then, finally, there are the stragglers: the old men who came for the free beer running in polka-dotted boxer shorts, the 70-year-old woman, out of place, with an aged Bette Davis face coated with makeup, garish red lips, huge dangling earrings, hair jutting out in twin, carrot-colored pigtails.

Michelle is standing next to me, watching. She takes off her gloves.

"This is what I have to look forward to," she says. "This is middle age in Wilmington."

"No," I say. "Not for you, it isn't."

KYLE CASSIDY cassidy@saturn.rowan.edu

Is 27 years old and pays the rent by writing Internet manuals and lecturing. His latest book, *Stickman's Way-Cool Guide to Network Wizardry* (RCNJ Academic Computing Press) will be published this month. He lives in New Jersey with his wife, Linda, who looks a lot like the Little Mermaid—but with legs. The marmosets adore her.

SERIAL ACCESS

BY E. JAY O'CONNELL

• There's nearly something for everyone on-line—no matter where one's interests lie. •

**********CONGRATULATIONS**********
You have reached the Serial Access BBS! This phone number will be good for one week, and one week only. Next week's number can be obtained in the NEW ACCESS NUMBER area by VALIDATED users only. We've found it necessary to move around a lot. Lurkers are welcome--even crybabies. In fact, we *like* crybabies. Cry, cry, cry! But remember, babies, by the time you try to find us, we'll be gone. It takes a while to subpoena a dozen different anonymous servers. In a dozen different countries! If you would like to join us, please fill out the validation form that follows. The first question goes without saying--but we'll ask it anyway!
To the best of your recollection, exactly how many people have you killed?

Dear Strangehack,

Thank you for your completed validation survey. We've noticed, sadly, that nothing you've said on-line really *proves* anything, one way or the other. You must realize that we maintain an electronic newsclipping service. All your info feels more than a little... canned? Confess. It's from the newswire, isn't it? This number expires in just 48 hours. Still time for a Fed-Ex'd validation. We're very sorry to have to be so strict, but surely you can understand our position.

ACCOUNT *STRANGEHACK* SUSPENDED PENDING VALIDATION
GO KILL SOMEBODY AND HAVE A NICE DAY

Congratulations Strangehack!

The Ziploc received at this week's post office box scores you next week's number. To whom did (does?) this belong? You see, the part contained isn't (strictly speaking) essential. It may very well be your own. You know, Van Gogh, and all that. Anyway, while it shows some spirit, it doesn't rule out the mortuary trade. It could be the product of simple self-mutilation. It doesn't count unless you did it to someone *else.* We're not impressed by masochists.

Please send us something a little more... essential. We're giving you another week. We would like a newsclipping to accompany it--so don't procrastinate. We will forward said part to the proper authorities, with due credit, of course.
Remember the tree falling in the empty forest. People die all the time, sometimes quite suddenly, sometimes messily. If you don't take credit, the act is worthless. Meaningless. At any rate, you've been admitted into the file downloading areas. I'd look at the '80s CIA interrogation manuals at the very least. They're not hard to find. A little dry, I know, but crammed with information. We'll not see their like again, alas. Not from the wimps currently in power. But I'm getting political --I hate politics, really, but feel free to participate in the on-line discussion of socialized medicine. I know, it's everywhere! It's been going great guns since we started over a year ago. Would you believe that, even here, there are whimpering tit-suckers who defend it?

Strangehack,

Congratulations! I must say, your latest package really cuts to the heart of the issue, eh? :-) I know, I know! I'm sorry. Couldn't resist.

It's a small one, isn't it? And the newsclipping. So poignant. The mother too--and first, of course. Yet... she was "homeless" (how I *hate* that word!), wasn't she? Again, not to get political, but there are those of us who find such victims... easy? Again, whom do you wish to frighten? This may be a purely personal thing, but really, in a certain light you're doing society a favor. Nobody wants all these "people" underfoot, decreasing property values, catching tuberculosis, creating excuses for National Health, etc.

Doing them is like killing whores. A public service. Bottom line, it's *banal.* But it'll get you into the real-time chat areas. These are our most sensitive feeds. A certain type of Very Technical Person *might* be able to trace some of calls back to their original sources. If you weren't the right kind of person, that would be very, very bad.

You're in, Strangehack. You're in. Welcome to the club.

Strangehack,

We're sorry to have to interrupt your service, but even by our standards, you seem quite insane. There is, quite simply, nothing to your threats. You cannot 'crawl down the wires and suck the eyes from our skulls like pamentoes [sic] from olives.' You cannot trace us. I have friends in this industry--good friends--and they've informed me that the technobabble you're spewing is gibberish. We're terminating your account.

Still, congratulations of a sort are in order. You have taken the lead. Over 20 in less that 2 months! Aren't we the busy one? And to think I leaked your first message to the press! It is really quite sad, to kick you off. But you're making an ass of yourself. We can't tolerate this kind of rudeness.

Psychosis is forgivable. Incoherence is not. Your spelling and grammar are abominable. It is common courtesy in this community to use a spellcheck. Never mind. You're history.

Strangehack,

Touché. You seem to have more than one account on this system. I've hired a consultant to come in and thoroughly clean this machine. His English is poor. And he is being paid very, very well. So don't even think of trying to talk to him.

Good-bye. We won't be speaking anymore, away. Oh, and one more thing.

Eat shit and die! You're stupid, and you take very poor candid photos. Murky as hell. Your GIFs are among the worst I've ever seen. Get a flash, buddy! And try using JPEG! <grin>

Strangehack,

I've begun to wonder about you. You've found us again and created your own account. I showed some of your technobabble around again. This time, the verdict's a little more... gray. Yes. Well, the system will be down for about a week around Christmas. Such a busy season!

We'll be rid of you in the new year, I expect. I've forwarded all your calling data to the authorities--all your bragging, threatening, misspelling, everything. Our phone number changes as of now, and you won't find it again. I imagine they'll catch you soon. Someone with as poor a grip on the language as you can't possibly

be all that smart, computer monkey tricks aside.

I've been watching the television psychologists. One of them suggested that you may have had your itty bitty little penis cooked off in a botched circumcision (it happens!).

It wouldn't surprise me in the slightest.

Strangehack,

You win. You've found us again. Well. It's time for a short, shameful confession. I've never killed anyone. I run this board, but I've never hurt a fly. Not that I wouldn't love to. Not that I don't dream of it. I think I will, someday. I started this to get going myself, you see, but somehow--well, I admit, I've been living vicariously through you. A few of the old-timers gave me a few credits, left my calling card. I'm a fraud, Strangehack. But you said that all along, didn't you?

I've been studying you all for so long. I found a few of you in various places on the net, filtered through a million poseurs to collect *you*--the real McCoy. Flattery will get one everywhere, eh? So I invited you into my home. And you were charming, strange, witty, fascinating, banal, obsessed. Fun.

But it's gone too far, and I'm shutting this system down. I must say, I'm fascinated by you, Strangehack. I would like to meet you. Would you really do all those things to me? But I'm not afraid of you. Not afraid in the slightest.

What would it be like, do you think, to be one of them? The victims? What goes through their minds as you strip the life from them?

A stupid thought. None of you ever seems to think it, I've noticed. But I guess I'm just a poseur, when it comes right down to it.

Good-bye, Strangehack. It's been interesting knowing you.

[The following message was posted anonymously to the USENET newsgroup *alt.murder.phun]*

Strangehack,

Because of you I have abandoned my life--my clothes, my books, my computers, (almost) all of my souvenirs. A liberating experience. I was watching TV in a bar across town, when I saw them going through my apartment. I thought Dan Rather was going to cry! Oh, the humanity! I'd say it was luck, that I saw it on television and escaped, but there is no such thing as luck, is there? Only destiny, and the Will of God. Not to get religious or anything. I'm posting this because I simply must talk about what it was like, meeting you.

As per your instructions, I went to the little booth in the back of that loathsome Vietnamese place. The grinning slant served me something that looked like a pile of sticks and slugs, and I had to pretend to eat it. I sat on the right side, facing the mirrored wall, like you said, and waited.

It took me over an hour to realize that you were already there.

I saw you, and oh, the chills up and down my spine! Pity about the ear. The tiny black hole winked at me from the still-pink ring of scar tissue. I guessed right, eh? Still, it got your nerve up, didn't it, to know you could do it? That you could ignore the rather incredible pain, and slice through human flesh, you, who had been squeamish about deboning chicken breasts. That you could slice through living flesh, even if it was only your own.

You're a dangerous fellow, aren't you? All the papers agree. All the newscasters. You must be stopped. You're a brilliant programmer. A brilliant murderer. A brilliant sociopath. A brilliant victim of multiple personality disorder.

I saw you in the smudged mirror, and the bright surge of fear, the sweet shock of recognition nearly made me come in my pants. Psychologists are pinheads. Our penis works fine and is the statistical average, size-wise.

Good-bye, Strangehack, and good luck. You will always have the heart of a small child. In a jar, in your briefcase. Yes, I know, I stole that from Robert Bloch. Such a small thing, the heart--such a big thing. She was so beautiful, so tender. She screamed so sweetly. I can hear it still. (Of course, I've got it on tape! We posted the .snd file, as I recall.) Virginity--such a wonderful thing. But we all lose it, and there's no going back.

Looking forward to reading about you in the funny papers. They'll never catch you, will they? I appreciate all your efforts. And for the ones still to come, well, as they say on-line--

Thanks in advance. :-)

E. JAY O'CONNELL ejo@world.std.com

Lives and writes in Cambridge, Massachusetts with his wife and the obligatory cat or two. A graduate of the 1994 Clarion West Writers Workshop, his work has appeared in *Aboriginal SF* and other publications.

THE THIEVES

BY LEVI ASHER

• In an insane world, what's impossible may be the only answer that makes sense. •

When I was 25 years old I worked as a minimum-wage data-entry clerk for an information-services firm in a small Connecticut town. There were ten of us there, and our place of work was a converted warehouse in a decrepit industrial park near the shore of the Long Island Sound.

We sat at white formica benches and typed into huge greenish bubble-shaped terminals that looked like futuristic TV sets from the '40s. It was depressing and pointless work. Our terminals were covered with a strange algae-like grime that we only discovered after Judy spilled coffee all over hers, exposing a pea-soup colored streak of plastic underneath. We weren't even sure if we were allowed to clean our terminals, and we never did; our collective sense of self was so low that we thought ourselves less important than the grime.

To work there, you had to have been a failure at something else. I had been trained as a cellist since early childhood and graduated from a top conservatory in New England, but then I went through a strange period that ended with my sudden and inexplicable decision to enter law school.

I suppose I was trying to affirm my complete freedom in the universe. In retrospect this was the stupidest thing I'd ever done, although the move did successfully confuse my friends and family.

But there was one problem, one thing I forgot to consider: law school was *hard*. I'd had no idea. I guess I thought my professors would allow me to pass through their classes just on the basis of my profound sense of irony. They would see that I was really a musician, that I posed no risk of ever taking work away from real lawyers. My professors didn't see it that way. For a while they found me useful as somebody they could count on not to know an answer in class, but they soon stopped even asking me questions. Picking on me was so easy it made them look bad.

I dropped out after two semesters, and one of my professors told me that he was hiring data-entry clerks for a small side venture he was involved in. He had apparently admired the deft typing I'd displayed in my term papers, although he'd given me a D in his class. I was flattered that he considered me employable, although I grew less flattered as I gradually discovered that his small side venture was making him a fortune. He'd drive up to the warehouse in a Jaguar to check on us occasionally, and the employees who'd been there a while called him all kinds of names behind his back.

My coworkers were around my age, but we didn't form close friendships. Being there was kind of like sitting in a waiting room at a psychiatrist's office: you're embarrassed to be seen there yourself and don't exactly feel like getting to know anybody else either. But we needed to break the monotony, so we would drive into town together for pizza sometimes, or gather around the coffee maker or the candy machine and talk about anything we could think of. Roger, Susan, and I would spend ten minutes discussing health insurance, a subject none of us were especially interested in or knowledgable about, and then Roger would go to the men's room and Michael would wander by and the three of us would talk about football or the ozone layer or the shape of Coca-Cola bottles, and then I'd leave Michael and Susan to continue the conversation without me, and two hours later I'd get into a rubber-band fight with Michael and Judy and Sean. But there were no real relationships. The associations we formed were like fractals: they grew according to random rules, they were of random size, and they lasted for a random period of time. And, ultimately, they meant nothing.

The strange thing was, I was sure that at the moment the gang of young toughs pushed the drugstore door back at me I heard one of them say "Harold's check."

I WAS IN A COFFEE-BREAK CONVERSATION FRACTAL WITH Harold and Rachel and Sean one morning, and Harold was saying that he'd been shopping for a new home computer. It struck me at the time that I would very much dislike having a computer at home when I spent all day on one at work. The fact that Harold wanted to buy a computer was a new addition to the list of things I disliked about him. The first thing was that he, alone of the ten of us who worked there, did not seem to realize this was a horrible job. The second was that he assumed that everybody watched the same TV shows he watched and would come in to work trying to discuss last night's *Charles In Charge* as if no American would do anything but watch *Charles In Charge* on a Wednesday night. Finally, he chewed loudly when he ate, and he'd stuff greasy tuna sandwiches into his mouth and lick his fingers with sickening aplomb. It was only because of the rules of fractal formation that I was drinking coffee with him now.

Several days after Harold bought his computer, he started worrying about his check. He'd put a certified check for $2,700 plus tax in the mail to Computers Unlimited in New Jersey. He'd called them every afternoon since then and they hadn't recieved it. We started hearing about this every time we were in a fractal with Harold, and in fact some of us started avoiding being in a fractal with Harold because we were sick of hearing about his lost check. Still, Harold kept reciting his saga, and it began to seep into our brains. Driving to work one morning, I suddenly realized that I'd been sitting there thinking about Harold's check, wondering what news of the lost piece of mail this day would bring.

That was on a Thursday morning, and the check didn't arrive that day or the next. The next day, Saturday, I was in a drugstore on Main Street buying some allergy medicine. I was opening the heavy glass door to leave the shop when the door was almost pushed closed on me by a small group of young men. They seemed like the kind a newspaper might refer to as 'a gang of young toughs,' and they looked almost too much the part to be real. The tallest one, who seemed to be leading the pack, was wearing a long-sleeved striped shirt and tattered pants. A slingshot stuck out of his back pocket. They all had shaggy, uncombed hair and nasty smirks, and before they shoved their way into the drugstore they'd been running down the street kicking lampposts and scaring dogs and yelling to each other. The strange thing was, I was sure that at the moment they pushed the drugstore door back at me I heard one of them say "Harold's check." I didn't entertain the thought that this guy could have actually said it, of course, but I found it strange that I should have so distinctly imagined I'd heard it. I stood on the sidewalk after I left the drugstore and watched as they clamored out of the store and ran into the distance, and I was surprised to hear it again, this time in another one's voice: "Yeah! Harold's check! All right!"

HAROLD LIVED IN OLD FAIRFIELD, ANOTHER SMALL town about 20 minutes away. There would have been no reason for the letter to come anywhere near the town where I lived.

But only a day after that, while I was driving home from work along Main Street, I spotted the guys again, and they were coming out of an appliance store carrying a cardboard box containing a brand-new color TV. Shocked, I steered my car into a parking space to watch them. There were four of them, the same ones I'd seen over the weekend, and they were carrying the box carefully and slowly, with one person at each corner, as if it now belonged to them all together. It was a 25-inch set, according to the box. I expected to see them put it into a car, but they continued to carry it down the sidewalk, and since Main was a one-way street I could not turn my car around to follow them.

Where were they taking the box? And who were they? They seemed to be in their late teens, so if there was a college nearby I might have guessed that they were students. But there was no college within miles. They

could have been sharing an apartment in the area anyway—although they could not have been around long, because I was sure I would have noticed them before. They really were an unusual-looking bunch. They seemed born for delinquency. They looked uncontrollable, as if their hair could never have been combed, as if no mother could have ever held them.

And yet at the same time they seemed somehow benevolent, although I could not figure out why. Perhaps it was because they seemed to belong to a different era. Their striped shirts, crown-shaped caps and brown leather shoes with sagging argyle socks made them look like a cartoonist's drawing of a gang of street toughs. Outdated as they seemed though, they were as integrated (one of the four was black, and one Chinese) as a birthday party on *The Brady Bunch.* I tried to memorize as much as I could about them as they walked down the street. Before long they'd walked so far down Main Street I could not see them.

A week later—and during this week Harold's check still did not arrive—I was driving in a different part of town on an empty strip of highway, when I was suddenly cut off by a screeching, speeding car that careened in front of me with no warning at all from a parking lot on the street. It was the four guys again, now driving in one of the worst cars I'd ever seen. The jalopy was huge and noisy and must have been 30 years old at least. They hadn't had a car last week, so I was surprised to see them in one now. I could see them clearly, because the convertible top seemed to be stuck half open. They could have just bought it, I realized, although I could not imagine anyone either selling or buying a car like this one.

The four of them were speeding recklessly down the street, ignoring the lanes, yelling and whooping and standing in their seats calling out nasty remarks to ladies on the sidewalk. I followed closely behind them, and when they swerved dangerously into a 7-11 parking lot I followed them, parked, and waited. Two of them ran in holding a fistful of rolled bills and came running out with two six-packs of root beer. They jumped into the car and tore out of the parking lot, screeching their tires, yelling and waving their bottles of root beer happily.

Their car was as weak as it was noisy, though, and I didn't have much trouble staying with them. They seemed to be going nowhere, just driving all over town—speeding up between traffic lights, braking hard to make their tires screech at each stop, and then revving their puttering engine to sound menacing while they waited for the light to turn green. At one red light I pulled up right next to them. At that moment the one in the front passenger's seat reached forward and took an opened envelope out of the car's glove compartment. He removed from the envelope what seemed to be some kind of bank slip, such as a reciept for a cashed check. As I watched, stunned, this scruffy young man gazed at the slip and suddenly kissed it, and then waved it in the air and yelled something as the light turned green and the driver stepped on the gas.

The next day at work I asked Harold what he'd heard recently about the check. Not wanting to seem completely insane, I had no intention of trying to explain to him what I'd seen, but I asked him, "How do you know somebody didn't steal your check? What else could have happened to it, anyway?"

"It wasn't stolen," he said. "I stuck it in a post office mailbox. You can't steal a letter from a post office mailbox. It's just lost. And anyway, even if somebody did steal it, they wouldn't be able to do anything with the check. It's made out to the computer store."

"They could forge a signature or something."

"Forge what signature? A guy's gonna walk into a bank and say, 'Yeah, uh, I'm from the computer store, can you put this money into my personal account?' You think they'd believe him? You don't just need a signature with a certified check. You need identification, and a rubber stamp, and a company number, and even then all you're allowed to do is deposit the money into the company account. If you tried to cash it they'd get suspicious."

"Still, you don't know for sure," I said. "You should stop the check."

"It was a certified check," Harold said. "It's the biggest pain in the world stopping a certified check. I already called the bank, and they said if I want to stop it I have to go down to the main office and fill out a bunch of forms, and then I have to get a voucher from the computer store signed by a notary public. Look, I know the letter's gonna turn up. It'll get there next week."

Everything he said made sense, but I still wasn't sure. I realized, though, that if what I'd seen meant that his check had been stolen and cashed, then stopping it would do no good anyway. Also, as we were having this conversation a couple of other people wandered into the hallway and joined the fractal and the next thing I knew I had five people all yelling at me that there was no way anybody could have obtained cash from that check. I hate it when an entire fractal agrees on something that I don't agree with and everybody starts yelling at me all at the same time. I didn't know anything about how banks worked and I didn't understand the subtle differences among bank checks and certified checks and cashier's checks, and I didn't know why everybody at work was suddenly so intensely caught up with the subject, and I didn't particularly care either. I got out of the fractal and drank my coffee alone at my desk that day.

That weekend I went for a walk in Burnside Park near my apartment. Burnside Park was on an inlet that flowed out to the sound, and it had a free ramp that people could

use to get their boats into the water. It was a nice day and there were a few boaters lined up waiting to use the ramp. As I walked past I heard some familiar voices yelling, and I was surprised to see the same four guys again, this time in bathing trunks. They were at the front of the line pushing a small powerboat off a trailer onto the ramp. I looked at them and they looked at me and the boat made a loud splash as it slid off the trailer and hit the water. It was a new boat, not large or fancy but nice enough, and the four guys were misbehaving as usual. One was spitting on the ramp and shouting obscenities at the other boaters waiting in line; another was standing in the boat and almost tipping it over; and yet another chomped on a candy and tossed the wrapper into the water. As the two who were pushing the boat jumped in and started the motor, I was stunned to see that the name of the boat, freshly painted in large black capital letters, was *HAROLD*.

The same four guys were pushing a powerboat off a trailer onto the ramp. As two jumped in and started the motor, I was stunned to see that the name of the boat, freshly painted in large black capital letters, was *HAROLD.*

BY THE END OF THE FOLLOWING WEEK, HAROLD HAD begun the procedures necessary to stop his certified check. He had the post office put a tracer on the lost piece of mail, which apparently required several hours' worth of filling out and delivering forms. Now his bank was sending him a form for a voucher to stop the check, and he was going to have to mail the form to the computer store in New Jersey, have the store mail it back, go to a notary public, have the notary public verify his signature, and mail the form back to the bank. Only then would the bank allow Harold to begin the proceedings for acquiring a new check. So Harold was pretty grouchy about the whole thing by this time.

But one morning, a week or so later, he walked in to work with a sunny expression. The post office had located the piece of mail, he said, and was now sending it along to the computer store. We all wanted an explanation of how it could have been lost for so many weeks, but Harold said he'd been unable to get one. The check had definitely been located, though he'd notified the computer store and the bank and the post office—I wondered why he'd neglected the local newspapers—and now everything was back on track.

The way I saw it, now he was really in trouble. Somehow the post office had mistaken some other piece of mail for this piece of mail, and now Harold had thrown away his voucher and cancelled his appointment with the notary public, and soon he was going to realize that the check was still lost after all. The next afternoon at work, though, he hung up his phone and said proudly, "Well, they got it. They're delivering the computer tonight."

Everybody congratulated him. As for me, I was somewhat surprised. But I knew for sure that something was not what it seemed to be. Maybe the post office had been lying and now the computer store was lying. Or maybe Harold was lying. I said to him, "So, you think now maybe the delivery guys will lose it and it'll be another month?"

Harold wasn't amused. "I seriously doubt it," he said.

I was so sure that no computer would arrive at Harold's home that I felt perversely excited in anticipation of the story Harold would tell in the morning, after the computer failed to show up. But that night as I sat in my apartment, I suddenly had the crushing feeling that the computer really was going to be delivered. This would make no sense at all—who had those guys been, and where had they gotten all their money, and where had Harold's check been all this time? Why had the boat been called *Harold?* And I hadn't seen the four guys around town in the past few days. Suddenly the fact that Harold's computer would be delivered that night seemed certain. It couldn't be—and yet, the moment it occurred to me that it might be, it suddenly seemed obvious that it would be.

And it happened just that way. Not only did the computer arrive, but Harold was blasé about it in the morning and too busy with his work to talk. All I felt was a terrible disappointment. Now things were back to their normal state: Nothing made sense. There was no secret pattern in anything, and I felt as if something brilliant and beautiful had been snatched from my hands.

LEVI ASHER brooklyn@netcom.com

Is a client-server consultant on Wall Street. He is the creator of Literary Kicks, a World Wide Web site devoted to Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and the Beat Generation (*file://ftp.netcom.com/pub/brooklyn/WWW/LitKicks.html*).

UNDERGROUND, OVERGROUND

BY SIMON NUGENT

• "One can't believe impossible things." "I daresay you haven't had much practice," said the Queen. —Lewis Carroll (1832–98) •

ENTER THE GHOST. HE STEPS CALMLY UP TO THE AutoDoc as the fat, sweating woman leaves clutching a vial of green liquid. He inserts the credit card lifted from the person behind him in line.

"Welcome, Mr. Newell," the machine modulates. "What is the matter with you?" A barely noticeable whir. "I hope it is not a recurrence of those migraines."

The man behind the Ghost thinks to himself that it is quite a coincidence this man has the same name and also suffers from migraines.

"I'm worried."

"What are you worried about?"

"Vampires."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Vampires. I'm worried about vampires." The real Mr. Newell tries to pretend he's not hearing the conversation. He looks furtively about for something else to observe.

"What is it about vampires that worries you?"

"I'm worried that they enter my room at night and suck blood from my neck."

There is a noticeable pause before the machine answers. "Perhaps you should see Dr. Mueller, the AutoAnalyst up the road. She is fitted with an upgraded version of a very efficient psychoanalytic application and is situated in a soundproof booth for complete confidentiality."

"I can show you marks."

At this point it is customary for the people in line—who of course haven't been listening—to turn away. Thus the real Mr. Newell automatically turns and is, in fact, glad that he does not have to witness the bizarre scene taking place behind him. He is discomfited by such a display of unreason. Were it not for the fact that the AutoDoc will surely have done so already, Mr. Newell would feel compelled to report the man who bears the same name as himself.

The Ghost peels off his shirt. The machine runs a wave of ultrasound over his body, mapping out the contours. Two penetration marks appear on the AutoDoc's four-dimensional analysis. It runs through terabytes of data trying to find a condition the symptoms of which correspond to those it sees in the scan. It takes a saliva sample from around the wounds. Blood type AB-negative, as opposed to Mr. Newell's O-positive. Enzyme analysis shows proteins foreign to the human body.

"I am afraid, Mr. Newell, that I do not have the information to deal with your ailment. Perhaps you are the victim of a dangerously off-centered person. I suggest you call the Equilibrators who will find this unfortunate and attempt to restore his or her intrapsychic harmony."

"You don't think it's vampires."

"No. You know that no such creature exists. Watch your balance."

"Even though all the evidence suggests that I am being attacked by vampires."

"Your hypothesis rests on the assumption that these creatures exist. There is no mention of any such creatures in the medical data, therefore your argument is flawed and unhealthy."

Mr. Newell wakes up to find the man watching him from a chair in the corner of the room. Then he disappears, or Mr. Newell just wakes up properly. It is a long time before he gets back to sleep.

"But it is possible that vampires do exist, only for some reason knowledge of their existence has been withheld from you. I suggest you request additional information on vampires to the central committee."

"The witholding of such information is possible only if you attribute a large level of disequilibrium to the Equilibrators who programmed me. Of course that would be a fallacy. Good-bye, Mr. Newell. I hope your symptoms improve."

The real Mr. Newell, muttering a stabilizing mantra to rid himself of the insidious idea that the Equilibrators might be hiding something from the public, nearly cries out as a hand is placed on his neck.

"Your turn now."

Exit the Ghost.

MR. NEWELL ARRIVES HOME BEFORE HIS CURRENT Social Partner, as is usual. By the time she arrives he has begun preparing the second of the two meals suggested by their meal planner. Over dinner he relates to her the incident at the AutoDoc. How is it possible, they ask each other, that people still believe in such things? Yet going to bed that night Mr. Newell, after taking two of the sleeping tablets prescribed by the AutoDoc, shuts the bedroom window on the temperature-controlled night outside and locks the bedroom door.

In spite of his medication, Mr. Newell spends a restless night. He has no real dreams. Rather, images keep recurring like obsessive thoughts. On a speeding train, a man with two different-colored eyes watches an intense, awkward young man with poor eyesight trying to maintain a conversation with a prim, old-fashioned-looking girl who assumes an air of superiority both of them know is a façade.

Mr. Newell wakes up to find the odd man watching him from a chair in the corner of the room. Then he disappears, or Mr. Newell just wakes up properly. It is a long time before he gets back to sleep. Another young boy is following a beautiful girl along finger of black rock surrounded by a stormy sea. The girl walks off the rock and hovers in mid-air while the boy steps off the rock, seems to touch the floating vision for an instant and then plunges into the foaming water.

This time Mr. Newell is awake instantly, moaning loudly and covered in sweat. In the morning his Social Partner berates him for being such a turbulent bedmate. He is annoyed by her lack of sympathy and goes off to work without kissing her.

This irritation stays with him throughout the morning. His mind is also troubled by his encounter with the deluded "vampire victim." He keeps repeating to himself that such creatures don't exist, but the insidious thought comes back with equal insistence: what if—*what if?*—they really do? It would mean the universe Mr. Newell believes he has inhabited for 44 years is unreal. It would mean there exists a level of creatures, actions and forces of which he (and presumably the rest of the population with few exceptions) are completely unaware. Were bloodless corpses found with lacerated necks? Certainly there was no mention of it in the news, but perhaps the Equilibrators choose to keep such stories secret in order not to upset the people.

Such thinking is dangerous and Mr. Newell knows it, but he cannot help wondering if he might be prey to dark forces. He decides to keep his eyes open for any signs which might suggest a supernatural underworld.

Unfortunately, once he begins to look, Mr. Newell realizes that there are many pieces of evidence pointing to the sinister scenario he fears. Pre-classic literature is littered with such signs. Of course, everybody knows the creatures in those poems and books are fictitious—but suppose that the images came from a subconscious realization that similar beings *did* indeed exist? Perhaps, Mr. Newell worries, it is possible our forebears were closer to the truth.

Of the many examples that spring to mind, the oft-quoted line from *Hamlet*—"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy"—seems to best sum up the danger.

And Mr. Newell's Social Partner, arriving home from work, does nothing to allay his fears when she tells him how she heard from a friend in the Central Committee that AutoDoc machines all over the metropolis have begun to put in requests for information on fantastic creatures. An outbreak of werewolf bites on the north side. Incubi and succubi tormenting by night. Listening to her, shivers run up Mr. Newell's spine. His fears are being confirmed. He makes a note to include a clove of garlic with their usual morning purchases. Again, despite the tablets, he sleeps badly.

DAYS PASS. MR. NEWELL BEGINS TO WONDER IF IN FACT there is some kind of plot. He never witnesses another example of what has become known as "indecent irrationality," but stories filter in of RoBusses filing requests for the location of El Dorado, Gotham City, and The Sprawl. There is mention of Leisure Agents turning away people looking for holidays in Avalon and Atlantis, Ur and Ys.

Sitting in his place on the RoBus, on his way to work, Mr. Newell worries. What if, he thinks, there are rival factions of Equilibrators vying for control? But that is absurd. Had some experimental scientist found a way of tapping into one of the imaginary dimensions tangential to our own? Was this possible? Mr. Newell didn't know.

Slotting his portable MediaMan into the interface in the arm of his seat, he opts for "current affairs" and scrolls his way through the morning news. His attention is caught by the headline "Robot Genius in Death Dive." Apparently the departments of Cognition, Bioengineering and Computer Science at the University of Utah have been cooperating on a huge government-funded project to develop an artificially intelligent machine. The project (Brains Or Bytes) had been declared a success last week when it was revealed that a robot had been built who consistently scored 150 points in both Performance and Verbal IQ tests.

This morning one of the team leaders had gone to fetch BOB for his morning session with the Turing-Testers, whose job it was to prove that BOB wasn't really intelligent. On entering the room he found a piece of paper and a broken window pane. BOB had written a suicide note before hurling himself out the window and smashing himself to expensive pieces on the campus below.

The accompanying holograph showed pieces of metal and shards of glass strewn over the section of concrete that had been the point of BOB's impact. Neon police markers cordoned the area off. Some smart-ass students had placed a sign against one of the cones which read "CAUTION. ZERO CROSSING."

A collective gasp in the RoBus causes Mr. Newell to look up. On the wall of a plastic laser factory something—surely not somebody—had aerosoled in Day-Glo

pink: "BEWARE THE JABBERWOCK." The man opposite Mr. Newell, who had rarely said a word to him even though they sit in these places twice each day, leans over and whispers, "What do you make of that?" Somehow this strikes Mr. Newell as an inappropriate thing to say.

"I AM ON MY WAY TO WORK ON THE ROBUS AS USUAL," writes Mr. Newell, "when I realize that the man opposite me is not the man who should be there. His face is familiar, though I cannot remember from where. He stares at me for a while and then begins to mutter something. I cannot hear what he is saying and lean closer to him. I realize he is reciting a poem or rhyme of some kind. I can remember the words clearly: *Yesterday upon the stair, I met a man who wasn't there. He wasn't there again today; I wish that man would go away.*

"As I take in the words, I hear banging on the window of the RoBus. Looking out I am horrified to see vile monsters of all kinds pressing up against the plastex. I shrink back in fear but the other man, who I now see to be myself, shouts out "And with my vorpal blade in hand!" and leaps out through the window into the throng of fiends who, instead of tearing him—me—to shreds, assume a rather ridiculous mien and trot off like a motley gang of stuffed toys."

Mr. Newell appends his password and sends this dream data to the analysis computers of the Equilibrators as he does every morning. This morning, he thinks, they will not appreciate my dream.

Sure enough, a message comes blinking back on his monitor telling him to recite certain stabilizing mantras, practice certain ego-strengthening exercises and, surprisingly, to take the day off work. It concludes "We will monitor the latent content of your dreams tomorrow and if a sufficient resolution has not occurred you will be required to report to the Central Laboratories for further adjustment. Watch your balance."

Mr. Newell decides to go to a local exhibition of full color, three-dimensional holographic plottings of partial complex numbers on a Gottlieb hypersphere. He is particularly interested in discovering how the artist has managed to depict the 2-D numbers on a theoretical 4-D structure and reduce it to a 3-D hologram. It proves not to be effective, and Mr. Newell is forced to leave after a brief period. He keeps seeing dragons and mermaids coming out of the holographic mountains and valleys towards him.

AT THE AUTODOC, MR. NEWELL WAITS TO GET SOMEthing for the migraine that has come on since leaving the gallery. He has been in line some time and has heard—not listened to—a young girl requesting contraceptives, an older man complaining about his gradual loss of subcortical white matter and a woman whose rods are being burnt out by continual use of a panoramic pleasure simulator. Finally, it is Mr. Newell's turn.

His head bursting, dizzy, crowded, he inserts his card and is greeted by the machine.

"Doctor, I have another migraine. But it's more than that. I feel—haunted."

"Haunted? Can you expand on that?"

"I think I'm being haunted by, well, vampires."

"I know that."

"You do?"

"Yes, you told me a few weeks ago."

"Oh! But not just vampires. Werewolves and… goblins." He pauses, something only just striking him, "By a man who isn't here." His mind races. "By phantom cities—by Gotham City!" He begins to grin. "By places that never existed."

Much to the dismay of the people behind him, who aren't listening, he begins to laugh out loud. "I'm being hunted with a vorpal sword, courted by mermaids, swooped on by dragons!"

He is now having difficulty speaking he is laughing so hard. "And I'm being pursued by a… by a *jabberwock!"* He shouts the last word out and collapses against the wall, howling in mirth.

"Mr. Newell," puts in the AutoDoc quickly, "are you all right? Take hold of yourself. Watch your balance."

"Peristalsis," chuckles Mr. Newell, *"Paracelsus*, even." Wiping tears from his eyes he removes his card from the machine, turns to indicate that he has finished and realizes that everybody has fled.

He stands panting, still dissolving into giggles at some thought, a ring of recently evacuated space around him. His lips form a string of words whose relationship, if any, he alone knows.

Vampire. Peristalsis. Catafalque. Jabberwock. Herbert. AutoDoc.

SIMON NUGENT Simon@helpdsys.demon.co.uk

Earns his crust in the computer industry and writes cyberspoof after hours as therapy. He is currently working on a follow-up to "Underground, Overground" that has lots of sex in it. He doesn't read the blurbs on backs of books and is going into hiding when the revolution comes.

FALLEN STAR, LIVE-IN GOD

BY RACHEL R. WALKER

• *People are attracted to the famous. But that attraction works both ways—and not always for the best.*

ALL I HEAR IS JENNY'S BREATHING, NOW SLOW AND steady. All I feel is the cool twisted sheet coiled about my ankles.

Peace.

I NEVER USED TO MIND THAT JENNY DIDN'T KEEP NEWSpapers or magazines around. After a while you get sick of reading about yourself. Same with her apparent lack of a television. You don't have to see *those* tabloids, either.

And I didn't care that we never left her apartment. At first I didn't even want to leave her bedroom. But now I'm starting to wonder.

"JAKE, THIS WAY!"

"Jake, let's see that smile!"

"Jake, is it true what they say about you and Hope Shelley?"

EVERYBODY THINKS I LOST MY VIRGINITY AT 19, WHEN I starred with Hope Shelley in *Walking Away.* Hope believes it, too. But Jenny found me at 16.

"JAKE, OVER HERE!"

"C'mon, give us those teeth!"

"Jake, how do ya feel?"

I GREW UP IN DUNDEE, ILLINOIS, NEAR CHICAGO. WHEN I was 14, my oldest sister Maggie got me a part in a college play she was in. I tell interviewers that I felt something special the second my foot touched the stage boards. It's a good line, but I've used it so often I can't remember if it's true.

I remember the audience cheering. Thunder filled the theater and echoed between my ears.

Chicago isn't New York, thank god, but it's true that you can do enough theater in Chicago to make even Hollywood take notice.

Everybody thinks I lost my virginity at 19, when I starred with Hope Shelley in *Walking Away.* Hope believes it, too. But Jenny found me at 16.

At 16 I landed my first big role. *City of Lights* wasn't supposed to be my picture, but after opening night everybody was talking about Jake Dooley, an astonishingly brilliant presence as flash addict Mickey Randall. And after the premiere party at Spago, there was Jenny, a surfer chick exalted by a teenager's imagination into a goddess. Goddesses probably don't wear Cal Tech T-shirts, though. And they sure don't lean close to sixteen-year-old boys and whisper, "How would you like me to make you howl?"

"*JAKE!* JAKE, I *LOVE* YOU! I *LOVE* YOU, *JAKE!"*

"Jake *please* look this way Jake *please* c'mon *pleeeez!"*

"*Jake!* Omi*gawd*! Didja *see*? He *looked* at me!"

WHY *DOES* SHE KEEP THE SECOND BEDROOM LOCKED?

AFTER *CITY OF LIGHTS,* AND AFTER JENNY'S APARTMENT, I didn't see her until *A Name For Baby*—the second flick of my first three-film contract. The critics were kind to me. "A finer actor than this movie deserves." "With a better script, Dooley would've shone again." Dressed in flowing gray, Jenny found me at Roxwell's after the first week figures came out. Once more she ushered me into her Nissan and blindfolded me—and I didn't care. I felt I deserved a firing squad. Instead, when the blindfold was removed, I blinked the dust away and squinted in the candlelight that set Jenny's heavy-curtained bedroom aglow. "You deserve something special tonight," she whispered, pulling me to the yet-untangled sheets, guiding my hands to her. "Let me hear you howl."

"AND THE NOMINEES FOR BEST ACTOR ARE… JAKE Dooley, for *Silent Drums*…"

MY NEXT-OLDEST SISTER EILEEN USED TO GIVE HERSELF screaming nightmares from reading scary bedtime stories. Mom finally had to throw out the book with the Bluebeard stories. Didn't help. Eileen kept opening all the doors to make sure there weren't any cast-off wives shut away in our creaky house.

What does Jenny keep behind her locked door?

A *FATHER.*

"It's me, Sean. Remember your ol' dad?"

A *son.*

"Very pleased to meet you, sir. Sorry you have to leave so soon. I guess old habits are hard to break."

The open *road.*

"You force me to go on this crazy trip and *you didn't bring a map?* You learn to drive the same way you learned to be a father?"

Together, maybe, they'll find… *Points To View*. Starring Robert Harrigan. And Jake Dooley. Coming soon to a theater near you. Rated PG-13.

I NEVER LIKED THE BOUGH: TOO NOISY, WITH SERVICE worse than the music. Roxwell's is where I usually take my meetings, but the Roxwell's staff would pay too much attention to me. The Bough people see so many celebrities that I was almost anonymous. Exactly what I wanted for this meeting.

Lucas tossed his pale hair out of his bleary eyes. "Ya sure y'want this?" He glanced nervously about The Bough. Everybody was watching Hope Shelley (a brunette this season) dancing with her latest. "I mean, y'don't even drink." His hands were shaking worse than when we made *Louisiana Air*; their rhythm clashed with the pulse from the speakers. "Whatcha want with TZ? Not even a stellar trip. Just knock ya' assward. Gimme couple more days—I'm a great shopper." He snickered, then put on an ill-fitting sober expression. We still looked like brothers around the eyes, but his were now shadowed and gaunt. "Meet me here again Tuesday, and I'll have guaranteed DEA-pure anything. No extra charge." A wavering craftiness lit the silvered blue depths. "Maybe you could talk to Deni 'bout takin' me back. I c'n still work. Whaddya say? F'get the TZ. Lemme getcha somethin' better."

"I'm buying it for a friend."

"AND THE WINNER IS… JAKE DOOLEY, FOR *DIXIE Wailing*!"

I KNEW SHE'D BE LOOKING FOR ME. I STAYED ALERT until I spotted her glittering in silver and blue, tall and blonde, as graceful and supple as when I was 16 and Hollywood was my new playground. Maybe I'd get her surgeon's name for future use.

It wasn't easy to cut through the worshipping surf of the crowd. If each touch had been a drop, I'd have been soaked by the time I reached Jenny. But she never minded waiting. I slid a hand through her silky hair and pulled her ear close to my mouth: "How would you like me to make you howl?"

ALL I HEAR IS JENNY'S BREATHING, NOW SLOW AND steady. All I feel is the cool twisted sheet coiled about my ankles.

Slowly I slide off the mattress to the carpet, careful not to knock the two empty tumblers off the bedside table. Pants, Rolex—gotta watch the time. Her keys. I take the glasses and rinse them out in the kitchen sink, just like Ari did when he played crooked client to my idealistic defense attorney in *On Closer Inspection*. Though this isn't a murder story; no one will care about what made Jenny sleep.

8PM (HBO) MOVIE (CC)–Drama *2:15* ★★★★

"Blood and Oil" (R) Young intelligence agent (Jake Dooley) clashes with commanding officer (Ron Cliffords) in this absorbing look at the Gulf War.

JENNY MUST HAVE BOUGHT THIS LOCK HERSELF; IT doesn't match the other doorknobs in her apartment. The fourth key I try clicks. I step inside and flip on the lights.

Three of the walls are covered with posters.

City of Lights. Walking Away. Louisiana Air. Silent Drums. Dixie Wailing.

And more: Below the posters sit two low bookcases, each with two shelves apiece. One filled with paperbacks, the other with scrapbooks.

The fourth wall is covered by a giant screen TV, almost as big as the one I have at home. A VCR or laserdisc player underneath, and a tall cabinet on each side of the screen. Next to the right-hand cabinet, under a *Mad/Ave* poster, is a stereo and a filled CD rack. My bare feet are cold as I cross the well-varnished floor to check the titles. All soundtracks. My mouth twitches when I see the *'Blading* album. If only the movie had done as well. Maybe I *should* have done my own stunts.

Now the cabinet next to the TV. I pull open the doors and tilt my head to read the videotape spines, the titles on the shelf matching the posters on the walls. All here—even *Smoke Test* and *A Name For Baby*, and *Dixie Wailing*—

I snatch the tape, frowning as I check the back. The studio seal gleams beside the copyright infringement warning. Not a bootleg. I check the picture on the front: There's me and Whit with our saxophones in the New Orleans cemetery, a smaller version of the poster hanging to my left. Gold letters celebrate my win from earlier tonight.

This isn't out yet.

My agent would know. She always gets me a piece of the back end.

I slide the tape back onto the shelf, not slamming the door for fear of waking Jenny, TZ or no. I investigate the other cabinet. These shelves are filled with home videotape dubs, carefully labeled in Jenny's tight compact script. My TV guest shots. Interviews and profiles, organized by show and date. I close the door, a niggling thought tickling the back corner of my mind. I cross to the bookshelf with the paperbacks. Top shelf: movie novelizations, complete with full color photos from the major

motion picture starring Jake Dooley. All clearly read many times, a few held together by green rubber bands. I don't recognize the stuff on the bottom shelf.

I cross to the bookcase under the *Louisiana Air* poster with its cypress swamp and air-brushed faces. I give Lucas and my twenty-year-old self a sardonic grin, the one I used as the rowdy younger brother who had to be steadied by Lucas' character. Ha.

I pull out the first scrapbook. Newspaper clippings, sealed behind plastic, from my Chicago theater days. Even a review of that first University play.

She *is* dedicated.

Chronological order? Probably—

Dixie Wailing in the tape cabinet. The niggling thought leaps from the wings to center stage. The dates on the interview dubs.

Chronological order.

My hands are trembling worse than Lucas'. I take the scrapbook from the far right end of the shelf and flip through the plastic pages. Ticket stubs. Reviews. Glossy eight-by-tens. Profiles from fan magazines. Familiar headlines capturing slices of my life flick past, until I reach the biggest, blackest one of all:

Oscar Winner Jake Dooley Murdered

FILM STAR SHOT TO DEATH OUTSIDE ROXWELL'S
Police Hunt For Mystery Assailant

There's a three-column photo of a sidewalk chalk outline next to a studio portrait of me. My *Dixie Wailing* character. I look at the date above the headline.

```
Welcome to the Jake Dooley fan discussion
group. This file will serve to answer
some questions users frequently ask in
this area.

Among the topics covered in this file:
  —Conspiracy Theories
  —Dooley Disciples
  —Fantasies
  —Favorite Flicks
  —Jake Sightings
```

BACK TO THE OTHER BOOKCASE AND THE BOTTOM SHELF. I have to remove each book to see the titles—the spines are cracked white with over-reading.

The Jake Dooley Story. Fallen Star. The Comet Life of Jake Dooley. God of His Generation. Where Were You?: Remembering Jake Dooley. Death Comes Unexpectedly: Losing Hollywood's Brightest. Even a novel: not a novelization, but something unfamiliar with the strange title of *Jake Dooley's Doing Fine on Callisto.*

The copyright dates.

My hands are shaking. I check my watch; Jenny should stay under for another 15 minutes or so, if Lucas can be trusted. I carefully put the books back in place and leave the room, locking the door behind me. In the living room another bookcase stands near her desk. "Just stuff from school," Jenny had told me once on the way to her bedroom. "Nothing interesting."

Nothing interesting *then.* But I'm not 16 anymore. Time to see what Jenny's been studying at Cal Tech.

Space, Time and Gravitation, by Arthur Eddington. *A Quantum Mechanics Primer*, by Daniel Gillespie. *A Most Ingenious Paradox,* by Chandrapal Sarasvati Kumar. Other authors: Stephen Hawking. Rudy Rucker. Poul Anderson. Fritz Leiber. H. G. Wells.

I sink to her couch, ignoring the lumps and springs. The date above the headline. The dates on the books and the tapes. I'd believed Jenny to be about my current age. But if she's in her mid-twenties, and I'm *here,* I'm really old enough to be her father.

No.

The plot can change. I've demanded rewrites before—and I always wanted to direct.

I won't let the screen fade to black on me. All I have to do is wait for Jenny to take me back. She's built a *shrine* in there. She's worked hard for this opportunity—I'll take the offered chance. I settle back against the lumpy couch and laugh. Every good actor controls his exit.

Oscar Winner Jake Dooley Murdered

FILM STAR SHOT TO DEATH OUTSIDE THE BOUGH
Suspect in Killing to be Arraigned Today

BIRTHS

Caitlin Marie Anscom, girl, to Harper and Paula Anscom

Avery Kirby Dewey-Ingraham, girl, to William and Diana Dewey-Ingraham.

Jacob Dooley Townsend, boy, to Jennifer Townsend.

RACHEL R. WALKER rwalker@awod.com

Was a lifelong Midwesterner until she moved to Charleston, South Carolina, where she lives and works. Her short fiction has been published in *Vision SF* and *Alternate Hilarities*. She has also published non-fiction articles on such varied subjects as the Native American tribes of the Southeast, carpal tunnel syndrome, and architecture.

If you take advice from strangers, be sure to put it back when you're done.