

Tk'tk'tk by David D. Levine

David D. Levine's story "The Tale of the Golden Eagle" was a nominee for last year's Hugo Award. He's also a Writers of the Future Contest winner (2002), James White Award winner (2001), and Clarion West graduate (2000). Mr. Levine has sold stories to F&SF, Realms of Fantasy, and several anthologies, including two Year's Best volumes and Mike Resnick's New Voices in Science Fiction. The author lives in Portland, Oregon, where he and his wife, Kate Yule, produce the fanzine Bento. His web page can be found at www.BentoPress.com. Mr. Levine's tale of a distraught salesman light years from home is his first story for Asimov's.

Walker's voice recorder was a beautiful thing of aluminum and plastic, hard and crisp and rectangular. It sat on the waxy countertop, surrounded by the lumpy excreted-looking products of the local technology. *Unique selling proposition*, he thought, and clutched the leather handle of his grandfather's briefcase as though it were a talisman.

Shkthh pth kstphst, the shopkeeper said, and Walker's hypno-implanted vocabulary provided a translation: "What a delightful object." Chitinous fingers picked up the recorder, scrabbling against the aluminum case with a sound that Walker found deeply disturbing. "What does it do?"

It took him a moment to formulate a reply. Even with hypno, *Thfshpftth* was a formidably complex language. "It listens and repeats," he said. "You talk all day, it remembers all. Earth technology. Nothing like it for light-years." The word for "light-year" was *hkshkhthskht*, difficult to pronounce. He hoped he'd gotten it right.

"Indeed yes, most unusual." The pink frills, or gills, at the sides of the alien's head throbbed. It did not look down—its faceted eyes and neckless head made that impossible—but Walker judged its attention was on the recorder and not on himself. Still, he kept smiling and kept looking the alien in the eyes with what he hoped would be interpreted as a sincere expression.

"Such a unique object must surely be beyond the means of such a humble one as myself," the proprietor said at last. *Sthshsk*, such-a-humble- one-as-myself—Walker could die a happy man if he never heard those syllables again.

Focus on value, not price. "Think how useful," he hissed in reply. "Never forget things again." He wasn't sure you could use *htpthtk*, "things," in that way, but he hoped it got the point across.

"Perhaps the honored visitor might wish to partake of a cup of *thshsh*?"

Walker's smile became rigid. *Thshsh* was a beverage nearly indistinguishable from warm piss. But he'd learned that to turn down an offer of food or drink would bring negotiations to an abrupt close.

"This-humble-one-accepts-your-most-generous-offer," he said, letting the memorized syllables flow over his tongue.

He examined the shopkeeper's stock as it prepared the drink. It all looked like the products of a sixth-grade pottery class, irregular clots of brown and gray. But the aliens' biotech was far beyond Earth's—some of these lumps would be worth thousands back home. Too bad he had no idea which ones. His expertise lay elsewhere, and he was

