

TERRY BISSON

THE LEFT LEFT BEHIND

Plus...

“One of SF’s leading innovators!”

—BOOKLIST

TERRY BISSON

Winner of the Hugo and Nebula awards
Theodore Sturgeon award
Locus award
Phoenix award
Gran Prix de l'Imaginaire

“Bisson walks in the footsteps of Ray Bradbury and Kurt Vonnegut.”

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– Michael Bishop

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THE LEFT LEFT BEHIND

plus...

THE LEFT LEFT BEHIND

“Let Their People Go!”

plus

Special Relativity

and

“Fried Green Tomatoes”

Outspoken Interview

TERRY BISSON

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AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION

THE *LEFT BEHIND* NOVELS (some sixteen in all) by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins are among the best-selling fantasies in America today. Self-described as “apocalyptic fiction,” they tell the story of the Rapture, in which the faithful are yanked straight up to Heaven without dying, and the following seven years of Tribulation, when those “left behind” are ruled by the Anti-Christ (a sleazy Romanian) until Christ’s return. It all has to do with Armageddon and God’s plan for Israel and the Christian Born-Agains.

Millions believe this nonsense, and the *Left Behind* novels are hugely popular. Patrice Duvic, a French SF writer and editor, alarmed that they were about to be published in France, suggested to me that we write a parody in which the world is better off with the Born-Agains gone. Patrice was ailing, and died before we got started, but the idea and the inspiration are all his—

RIP, *mon frère...*

THE LEFT LEFT BEHIND

“LET THEIR PEOPLE GO!”

“**T**HE HOLY LAND,” SAID Vince. “This is where it all began.” He felt a thrill as he looked around at the arid rocky hills that had given birth to so many great religions. Although as a skeptical TV newsman he didn’t believe in any of them, he respected them all.

“And where it’s all still going on,” said the Israeli general, Blitz Kreig, who was Vince’s guide and host. “Don’t forget we’re in a security zone. This is not quite Israel—yet.”

A stone bounced off his helmet.

“Understood,” said Vince. While his worshipful (and cute) young camera-girl videotaped him, he began the broadcast he had come ten thousand miles to make.

“This is Vince Kirkorian,” he said, “reporting for IHS News, and I’m here near the Israeli settlement of Itz-Al-Aurz to interview Dr Kramer Kramer, the Nobel Prize winning biologist who—”

RACKETY-RACKETY-RACK! Vince’s intro was suddenly interrupted by a loud grinding noise, followed by high-pitched screams. AAAIYEEEE!

Annoyed, Vince signaled cut. “What’s all the racket?” he asked the general.

“Land reform,” General Kreig said proudly, pointing behind him to an armored bulldozer, which was demolishing a two-story house while wailing women in Arab headdresses looked on. “We’re making the desert bloom.”

Another rock bounced off his helmet.

“By bulldozing houses?” Like most TV newsmen, Vince had a highly developed appreciation of property values. “Where will these people live?”

“They’re Palestinians,” explained General Kreig, firing a short burst from his Uzi into a crowd of unruly kids. “They can hop on their camels and find another place to pitch their tents. This is the land God promised us. It’s in the Bible.”

Another rock bounced off his helmet. It didn’t seem to bother him.

“Oh, yes, the Promised Land,” said Vince, remembering. It didn’t seem quite fair, but he knew better than to question other people’s sincerely-held religious beliefs. “Can you ask them to hold off on the land reform till my interview with Dr. Kramer is over?”

“Done,” said the general, signaling the dozer driver, who shut down the huge machine. “And here comes the good doctor now!”

VINCE COULDN’T HIDE HIS smile as the old man approached, walking down the path from the attractive concrete battlements of the settlement perched on top of a nearby hill.

In his ragged cardigan and baggy pants, he looked exactly like Einstein, even to the kindly twinkle in his eye.

"I always watch your news show," Dr. Kramer said as he shook Vince's hand. "The world needs more honest, enterprising young journalists like yourself. And so cute!"

Vince all but blushed. "Thank you, Dr. Kramer. Now please, tell us about your new discovery."

"My new bio-gen seed grows fish from soil," said the aged humanitarian. A rock barely missed his head, and he ducked politely. "Gefilte fish, lox, whitefish, pickled herring. You name it. No one will ever go hungry again."

"No Jew, anyway," said the general, scattering a clump of children with a short burst of fire.

"That's wonderful news for a hungry world," said Vince. "And how do you intend to market this new discovery?"

"Market?" Dr. Kramer looked confused.

"Aren't you going to patent and license this revolutionary new bio-gen? It's worth millions."

"I am an old man," said Dr. Kramer, laughing. "What do I want with money? All I ask in return for my discovery is that the world allow Israel to live in peace."

Just then, as if in answer, there was a distant roar.

It grew louder and louder.

"Hit the dirt!" cried General Kreig, pulling Vince and Dr. Kramer to the ground with him. Vince looked up and saw swarms of funky-looking fighter-bombers streaking in low across the barren hills.

They were firing rockets and machine guns. Bombs were bursting all around.

"Arab jets!" cried the general as they all crouched behind the bulldozer, in the rubble of the wrecked Palestinian home. "Israel is doomed!"

"Maybe not," said Dr. Kramer. "Look!"

Anti-aircraft fire was blossoming around the planes, knocking them out of the air. They crashed into the hillsides, one after the other.

“Israeli missile defense!” said Vince. “Just in time!”

“I wish!” said General Kreig. “But our missiles are tied up in Gaza, taking out terrorists and bystanders. I don’t know where these missiles are coming from.”

“I do!” said Dr. Kramer. “Look. It’s a miracle.”

Vince stumbled to his feet, heedless of his own safety. He shaded his eyes from the sun and looked more closely at the shapes in the sky. He could hardly believe what he saw.

What he had thought were exploding missiles were actually Angels, armed with Uzis, riddling the shabby Arab jets with holes and then batting them out of the sky with their snow-white wings.

“Get this on video!” he said to the camera-girl. *Angels?* he wondered. *Could this be happening?*

“They’re all down!” said General Kreig. “Israel is saved!”

“For now, anyway,” breathed the kindly old scientist.

“Did you get all that?” Vince asked the camera-girl. They were standing amid the rubble of smoking planes.

“I think so,” she said, her eyes shining.

“Let’s get out of here,” said the general. “You can finish your interview back at the settlement!”

MOMENTS LATER

Firing a few short bursts to clear the way, the general ran toward his armored Humvee. Dr. Kramer and

the camera-girl were right behind him.

Vince was about to follow when he heard a noise behind him. He turned and saw an old man in a dirty robe of goat's wool. He had a mad look in his eyes and carried an ancient Winchester 94 in one hand.

"Charlton Heston?" asked Vince, unbelievably. He was pretty sure Heston had retired.

"Wrong prophet!" said the old man. His eyes were like two burning bushes. "Talk about tsuris! The Anti-Christ is coming, and a nice Jewish boy he is not!"

Then he fired the rifle into the air and disappeared.

An Old Testament prophet!, thought Vince, as he ran toward the armored car. *Could this really be happening?*

"Did you get all that on video?" he asked the camera-girl, when he got to the Humvee.

"I think so," she said, her eyes shining.

"Come on, come on," said General Kreig. A rock bounced off the windshield of the Humvee as they sped toward the settlement. The general didn't seem to mind.

"I wonder why he has such a heavy Brooklyn accent?" Vince mused to himself. "There are mysteries everywhere I turn."

ELEVEN HOURS LATER

Except for take-offs and landings, which still require our hominid skills, modern airplanes fly themselves. Which is a good thing. The EconAir 777, high over the Atlantic, was on autopilot, and so was its pilot, Captain "Cap" Church. He wasn't thinking of the gigantic machine stuffed with dozing passengers that was

in his command, or even of the faithful (if slightly dotty) wife, troublesome punked-out daughter and grubby son he had left behind in the USA.

He was thinking only of the lovely young stewardess, Amy, who was sitting on his lap, and of the hominid task at hand (literally): the unhooking of her brassiere.

Just as he managed to skillfully undo the clasp with two fingers, he heard a ding.

Amy stiffened. The Captain was already stiff. "That was a call button," she said.

"So what?" the Captain murmured, waiting for her ripe full breasts to fall into his eager hands, like oversized fruit from the Tree of Life. "Let 'em wait."

"First Class," said Amy, rehooking her bra. "It's a special ding."

"Then let 'em eat cake."

"We're out of cake," she said, hurriedly buttoning her blouse.

MOMENTS LATER

Amy softly shut, sealed, locked and secured the cockpit door behind her and tiptoed into the First Class cabin.

It was quiet and dark, just as it should be. She tiptoed toward the lit call light.

The white-haired old lady in seat 4E looked alarmed. "Where's my husband?" she asked. "He was sitting here, in 4F, reading the Bible, when I dozed off, and when I woke up, he was gone!"

"Are you sure?"

"OK, maybe it was *The Wall Street Journal*," the old lady sobbed.

"Perhaps he's in the bathroom," suggested Amy.

Old men peed a lot, she knew, from personal experience.

“With all of them? Doing what?”

“All of who?”

“Them!” screeched the old lady, waving her hands in the air. “They’re all gone!”

Amy turned and looked around. It was true! First Class was empty, except for the clothes that lay neatly folded on the seats. But how could that be? She had attended to them all, heard their complaints, served them their “champagne” (a fun California varietal) and fluffed their pillows herself.

“Calm down,” she said. “Let me check.”

Amy tiptoed up and down the aisle. All the seats, except for 4E, were empty. Each had only a little pile of clothing left behind. Even the socks were neatly folded in the shoes.

Strange.

There was no one in the bathroom. Then she heard a tapping noise from the back of First Class.

One man sat alone, in seat 12A by the window, working on a laptop computer. As she approached, Amy saw that it was Vince Kirkorian, the famous TV journalist. She had noticed him boarding. He was even cuter in real life than on his award-winning TV news show.

“Excuse me, Mr. Kirkorian,” she said.

“Sorry but I can’t give autographs while I’m working,” he said politely, without looking up. “I’m in the middle of a big story. I’m on my way back from Israel, where--”

“Who was sitting next to you?” Amy asked. “Did you see what happened to them?”

“Some supermodel,” he replied, tapping away furiously without looking up. “She was cute. I was telling

her about how I saw, or thought I saw, actual Angels with Uzis knocking Arab jets out of the sky during an unprovoked sneak attack on Israeli settlements, and she dozed off. Is she not there? She must be in the bathroom.”

Supermodels had to pee a lot, he knew, from personal experience.

“In the bathroom with twenty-two other people?” Amy asked. “All naked?”

That got Vince’s attention. He looked up, then down at the almost-empty seat beside him.

“That’s her underwear!”

“How do you know?” asked Amy.

“Just a guess,” said Vince, eyeing the lace-trimmed Victoria’s Secret bra and panty set, neatly folded on top of a Chanel gym suit. Like most TV celebrities he had a keen eye for nice things. “Those must be her shoes on the floor. Prada, and not a knock-off either. Something very strange is going on here.”

“You’re telling me,” said Amy. “I’m going to get the Captain.”

“Isn’t that him?” asked Vince.

It was. Captain Church was standing in the open cockpit doorway, struggling into his uniform jacket. It was a little tight across the belly.

“Zip up your pants, Cap,” said Amy. “We have a crisis here.”

SECONDS LATER

“Done,” said Captain Church. “Now, what’s the problem?”

Amy told him. “First Class is almost empty. All that is left behind, except for Vince here—do you mind

if I call you Vince?”

“Not at all,” said Vince. She was kind of cute.

“—and the old lady blubbering in 4E, is little piles of clothing, neatly folded, one on each seat.”

“Perhaps they are in the bathroom,” offered the Captain. “They have their own, you know.”

“All of them at once?” said Amy. “I checked. It’s empty, except for a neatly folded pile of clothing on the toilet seat.” She shuddered, remembering the skid marks. “Somehow they all just suddenly disappeared.”

Hmmmm, thought Vince. He wondered if it had anything to do with the mysterious Angels he had seen downing Arab jets, or the crusty old Prophet who had sputtered some nonsense about the Anti-something or other.

“Jesus Christ!” said the captain. “Pardon my French but we’re looking at a paperwork nightmare. I wonder if it could be the Rupture.”

“The what?” asked Vince.

“The Rupture. It’s some Bible thing my wife back home is always mumbling about. Everybody goes to Heaven all at once or something.”

“First I’ve heard about a wife,” muttered Amy.

“Rupture. That doesn’t sound right to me,” mused Vince. “There must be some logical explanation for all this.”

SUDDENLY

Suddenly they heard shouts and cries from the back of the plane—the narrow, dimly-lighted tube where the Economy passengers sat squeezed together like pig parts in a long sausage.

Ayiesha Washington, the cute Economy atten-

dant stuck her head through the curtain that separated the classes.

“I need help back here!” she said. “Hey, where did everybody go?”

Amy told her.

“That explains it,” said Ayeesha (she spelled it differently every time herself). “Somebody must have peeked through the curtain and saw the empty seats in First. Now they’re all demanding upgrades.”

“Has anyone disappeared back there?” asked Amy.

“I wish!” said Ayessha. “Only the two Air Marshals. I went to wake them up, and their seats were empty. Nothing but two jump suits, neatly folded, and a couple of Glocks.”

“Jump suits?” asked Vince.

“Orange,” said Aiyesha. “They were traveling disguised as convicts. They were handcuffed together.”

They heard shouts from the back of the plane, then a deep, calm voice said, “Let’s roll.”

“Uh oh,” said Amy.

“I’ll handle this,” said the Captain, grabbing an intercom from the bulkhead. “This is your Captain speaking!” he said. “Return to your seats immediately.”

“No way!” came a shout. “We have miles. We have weapons. We want upgrades.”

“I shoulda grabbed those Glocks,” mused Iyesha.

“I can help.”

“Who?” They all looked at Vince. “You?”

“I’m a TV newsman,” he reminded them, straightening his tie. “I’m all about reassuring people.”

SEVERAL HOURS LATER

This is kinda fun, thought Captain Church as he brought the big 777 down for a landing. He usually let his co-pilot handle the landings, but it was good to get a little practice.

Besides, the co-pilot has disappeared with all the others, leaving only his neatly-folded uniform behind.

The disappointed Economy passengers filed off while Church filled out his log, dreading the paperwork ahead. Twenty-four missing, all from First Class. Plus the co-pilot and the Air Marshals.

Luckily, no one noticed. Church was relieved to find that the Flight Manager who checked off the passenger manifests was gone.

Vince followed the captain off the airplane, looking around in amazement. The Air Security ex-cons who poked through everyone's baggage were also gone. The long lines moved quickly.

The airport was strangely quiet. Peaceful.

"All the uniformed personnel have disappeared!" said Vince. He studied the Arrivals and Departures monitor:

DELAYED
 CRASHED
 DELAYED
 SPUN OUT
 DITCHED
 DELAYED

Then he looked at Captain Church in his blue and white EconAir uniform, with the gold stripes on the sleeve. "Wonder why you were spared, Captain?"

"I was temporarily out of uniform. And you can call me Cap."

“Cool, Cap,” said Vince, who was on a first-name basis with celebrities around the world. “Can I get a ride with you to my hotel? It looks like the shuttle buses are all missing their drivers.”

“No problem,” said the Captain, waving farewell to Amy and Ayiesha, who were meeting their dates in the gift shop. Amy didn’t wave back. “I owe you one for cooling out all those Economy Class complainers.”

MINUTES LATER

The airport exits were chaos, and the highway was worse—littered with burning and overturned cars, mostly caddies and SUVs. Luckily Cap’s Hummer H-1 was big enough to crunch through the debris.

Some awesome tragedy has occurred, thought Vince, whose newsman “antennae” were on “full alert,” taking in the scenes of destruction all around.

The hotel driveway was blocked by a burning bus, filled with screaming seniors, who were attempting to crawl out the narrow windows, without much success.

“No problem,” said Cap, executing a U-turn. “You can stay at my house.”

“Are you sure your wife won’t mind?” asked Vince.

“Positive,” said Cap. “She’s a Born-Again. Do unto others and all that. My grubby son will hardly notice. And my daughter will be thrilled. You’re a TV personality, and you’re kind of cute.”

“If you’re sure it’s no trouble,” said Vince.

HOURS LATER

It was almost dark when they arrived at Cap’s modest two-story colonial in a leafy, woody suburb.

They were met at the door by his punked-out daughter, Gotha.

“They’re gone, Dad,” she said.

“Who?”

“Mom and Billy.”

Rushing into the house, Vince and Cap saw two neat piles of clothing on the sofa, one large and one very small.

“My wife was grossly overweight,” said Cap. “And my son was small for eight. This is their stuff all right. And this is my daughter, Gotha, sixteen.”

“Eighteen,” said Gotha. She was covered with tattoos and piercings in odd places. She wore black lipstick, which looked funny with her rosy cheeks.

She’s kinda cute, thought Vince.

“We were watching the Jerry Springer Show,” said Gotha. “I was sitting on the couch between Mom and Billy when Jerry started to float upwards. I thought it was the horizontal hold, so I grabbed the remote from Billy, and I noticed that he was gone. Mom, too.”

“Hmmm,” said Vince. “Your remote has a horizontal hold?”

“Turns out it doesn’t,” said Gotha. “Once Jerry was gone, all the guests stopped fighting. They didn’t exactly make up, but they sat down and shut up. I had the feeling that even though the show was in trouble, the world was a better place, if you know what I mean.”

“I think I do,” said Vince. He liked this girl. She had a way of looking on the bright side.

“Did they like actually rise up through the ceiling?” Cap asked, looking up. “I’m asking because I don’t see any damage.”

“Didn’t notice,” said Gotha. “I checked Oprah. She was gone. So was Ellen.”

“HmMMM,” said Vince. “First Class disappears. Then all the uniformed personnel. And then all the afternoon TV talk show hosts. There’s some kind of pattern here.”

“I’m telling you,” said Cap, “it’s the Rupture. My wife and her colored preacher boyfriend are always talking about it.”

“It’s Rapture, Dad,” said Gotha. “And he’s not her boyfriend, and he’s not colored, he’s African-American.”

“Don’t contradict your father,” said Cap. He slapped her.

HmMMM, thought Vince. Maybe that’s why her cheeks are so rosy.

TEN HOURS LATER

“I like the black lipstick,” said Vince. “And I like your rosy cheeks, too. But they don’t exactly go together. They make you look like a clown. Not that there’s anything wrong with that,” he added.

“I know,” sighed Gotha. “It’s my dad. He’s always slapping me. That’s why I got all these tattoos.”

“I like them too,” said Vince. They were in interesting places. “Where are you going?” he asked.

Gotha was pulling on her panties. They had a skull and crossbones on the front panel, which was transparent otherwise.

“It’s morning,” she explained. “If Dad finds me in bed with you, he’ll slap me.”

“Maybe you should slug him,” said Vince. Even though, or perhaps because, he had never been married, he was a believer in women’s liberation.

“HmMMMM,” said Gotha.

TWENTY MINUTES LATER

After waiting a decent interval, Vince went downstairs, where he found Gotha and her father in the kitchen, drinking coffee and listening to the radio.

“Hannity is gone,” said Cap, speaking though a paper towel. He had a bloody nose. “So is Rush. I’m beginning to worry about Dr. Laura.”

“Good riddance to them all,” said Gotha.

He slapped her. She slugged him.

“Is there any news on?” asked Vince. He was interested in the news, but also eager to change the subject.

Gotha spun the dial:

“... the sudden disappearance of millions of world leaders last night and night before last as the world turned. The twenty-four hour event is expected to lead to crises and shortages as uniformed security personal, corporate CEOs, and many leading celebrities have also mysteriously ...”

“I’m telling you, it’s the Rupture,” said Cap.

“Rap—Sure!” said Gotha. “Jesus Christ!”

He slapped her. She slugged him.

“Can I use your phone?” asked Vince. “I should call the network and tell them I’m OK.”

MINUTES LATER

“Find out anything?” asked Cap. He was sitting at the kitchen table nursing a black eye with a steak.

“No luck,” said Vince. “The network has shut down. The suits are all gone.”

“The suits?” asked Gotha. Her cheeks were a little less rosy than before.

“The execs,” said Vince. “Actually, their suits are still there, but there’s no one in them. Apparently I’m out of a job.”

“Good for you,” said Gotha. “You’re way too cute to work for those corporate greedheads who control and distort the news in order to keep the people enslaved and fed on lies.”

“I never thought of it like that before,” said Vince.

“No TV news!” said Cap. “How are we going to figure out what is going on?”

“Alternative radio!” said Gotha. “Pacifica is still on!” She spun the dial again:

“...without the heads of state. The new Secretary General of the United Nations, Vlad, has declared a new World Government. And now for ten hours of uninterrupted harmonica music played by chimpanzees ...”

“World Government,” said Gotha. “That’s got to be a good thing!”

“Sounds commie to me,” said Cap. “And what kind of name is Vlad?”

“I can find out,” said Vince. “I have a secret contact in the UN. If somebody can give me a ride.”

“My Hummer is on empty,” said Cap, “and all the gas stations are closed. It was on the radio.”

“I can help,” said Gotha, putting on black goggles.

They looked cool.

ONE HOUR LATER

“This is the place,” said Vince.

They were on Gotha's big black BMW motorcycle, pulling up to the UN parking garage.

"Wait here," Vince said. "I must do this alone."

Gotha nodded and shut off the motorcycle.

Notebook in hand, Vince made his way up to Level Four, Area B, where he had arranged to meet with Leak Throat, his secret UN informant.

He heard footsteps.

"New shoes?" he asked, without turning around. "Nikes."

"You're good," said Leak. "Perhaps too good for your own good."

"Never mind that," said Vince, cutting right to the chase. "What's the scoop on this new World Government? What kind of name is Vlad?"

"Romanian," said Leak.

"Yikes."

"There's worse," said Leak, in a hoarse whisper. "It's all tied in with the attacks on Israel and the recent disappearance of millions. It's the End Times, the Last Days. This Vlad character is actually the Anti-"

Suddenly Leak's head exploded in a shower of blood, brain and bone. The sound of the shot came a split second later.

"Christ!" said Vince, as he made his way back down to the waiting motorcycle. "I wonder what he was trying to tell me."

ONE HOUR LATER

"There's definitely something strange going on," Vince said. He was back in the kitchen with Cap and Gotha. "I think it's tied in with the angels I saw defending the Israeli settlements. And the mysterious disap-

pearances. And maybe even the Old Testament prophet who uttered stuff in the desert.”

“This harmonica music is driving me nuts,” said Cap. “Whoever told these chimps they could play?”

“I think it’s time we talked with The Preacher-man,” said Gotha.

“The Preacherman?”

“Mom’s African-American minister,” said Gotha.

“Colored boyfriend,” said Cap.

She slugged him.

TWENTY-TWO MINUTES LATER

Three on a motorcycle? Don’t ask. They managed.

“I think you should stop slugging your father,” said Vince, as they pulled up in front of the Kristal Cathedral and jumped off, one by one.

“I think so too,” said Cap.

“I’ll think about it,” said Gotha. “But understand, I’m still way behind.”

The Kristal Cathedral was a huge mega-church, as big as the Superdome. The seats inside were empty. There was a pile of neatly folded clothing on each one.

At the altar, a handsome, vigorous middle-aged Black man was kneeling. Vince thought he was praying at first. But as they approached, they saw that he was weeping.

“I got left behind,” he blubbered.

“No shit,” said Gotha, looking around at all the empty seats. “And where’s Mom?”

“Raptured,” said The Preacherman. “Along with everybody else in my congregation but me.”

He wiped his eyes and looked around. “What’s

your Dad doing?"

Cap was up in the seats, going through the pants pockets. "Just looking for change," he called down.

"You're wasting your time," said The Preacherman. "I already cleaned them out."

"Before or after?" asked Gotha.

"It's an ongoing process," said The Preacherman. "Let's go downstairs to my office, where we can talk."

SHORTLY THEREAFTER

"Maybe it was the bunker that saved you," suggested Gotha.

They were seated in The Preacherman's modest half-acre office, in a bunker under the stadium.

"Negative," he said. "The Vice-President was in his bunker, cleaning his bird gun, and he's gone. I read it on the blogs."

"What about the President?" asked Vince.

"Gone too," said The Preacherman. "He was out in the open, cutting brush. All they found was a chainsaw and jeans. And a nice leather jacket. A replica of a WWII A1 flight jacket."

"He was a flyer," said Cap.

"He's sure as Hell flying now," said The Preacherman. "Now, what can I do for you folks? Are you interested in joining my congregation? We have plenty of seats."

A tear appeared in his eye, but was quickly wiped away.

"Negative," said Gotha. "This is Vince Kirkorian, the TV newsman. He wants to know what's going on."

"Former TV Newsman," Vince corrected. "But I still have the newsman's hunger to get at the facts be-

hind all these strange occurrences.”

“Occurrence,” said The Preacherman. “Singular. It’s all one event.”

“Which is?” Vince prodded.

“The Rapture,” said The Preacherman. “We all knew it was coming. Jesus Himself grabbed all these folks by the scruffs of their necks, like kittens, and hoisted them straight up to Heaven. In spite of the fact that they were mostly overweight.”

“But why?” Vince asked.

The Preacherman shrugged. “Cause He could? Beats me. He’s supposed to be coming back for us all anyway, and soon. Why those folks got to jump the line, I don’t know.”

“Could this have anything to do with the attacks on Israel and the new World Government?”

“Of course,” said The Preacherman. “It’s the End Times, the Last Days. That Romanian dude running the UN is the Anti-Christ. World government. Israel attacked. Armageddon.” He thumped the Bible on his desk. “It’s all here in the Good Book.”

“Told you!” said Cap.

“The clock is running,” said The Preacherman. “Now there will be seven years of Tribulation, starting yesterday at 2:20 Eastern Daylight Time.”

“During Jerry Springer,” said Gotha.

“The Tribulation’s gonna make Jerry look like Oprah,” said The Preacherman.

“What’s Tribulation?” asked Cap.

“Trouble,” said The Preacherman. “Hard times. Flood and famine, plague and panic, hurricanes, forest fires, wars and rumors of war.”

“Yikes,” said Cap. “What can we do?”

“Ride it out,” said The Preacherman. “It’s all

good, actually. After seven years Jesus returns and it's hallelujah time. The Anti-Christ fouls out. Jesus hits all His free throws. All us foursquare born-again's get a championship ring."

"What about the rest of us?" Gotha asked.

The Preacherman rolled his eyes, turned up his palms and shrugged.

"I have to say, I find all this somewhat hard to swallow," said Vince. "I don't mean to question anybody's sincerely-held religious faith, but surely you don't actually believe all this crazy shit?"

"Here," said The Preacherman. He handed Vince the Bible. "Open it anywhere."

"And then what?"

"Just do it. Open it and read."

Vince opened it and read.

Bingo.

"Jesus Christ!" he said. "It's all true. I've been such a fool!"

"Told you!" said The Preacherman, taking his Bible back. "Anybody else want to check it out?"

"Not me," said Gotha.

"I'll take Vince's word for it," said Cap. "He's a TV newsman. Or was."

"Still am," said Vince, shaken. "Only now I know the Truth."

ONE WEEK LATER

"How come everybody calls you the Preacherman?" asked Vince. "What's your real name?"

They were sitting around in the kitchen of Cap's colonial home. The empty Kristal Cathedral was lonely, so The Preacherman had joined them.

“That is my real name,” he said.

“Huh?”

“You know how Black folks like funny names? My Moms was down with that. She wanted me to go into the ministry so she named me The Preacherman.”

“Oh,” said Vince. He had started out as a sports reporter and he remembered a basketball player named God Shamgodd.

“But you can just call me The.”

“Cool, The,” said Vince, who was on a first-name basis with celebrities around the world.

“I just checked all the blogs,” said Gotha. She was sitting at the computer. “Looks like this Rapture business is for real. The politicians, the corporate bigwigs, the greedheads—they’re all gone for good.”

“You mean for bad!” said Cap. “No big oil CEOs means no gasoline. My SUV is just a hunk of tin!”

“That means no more global warming,” said Gotha. “Look on the bright side.”

“No government means no more wars,” said Vince, looking on the bright side. It was new to him but he was beginning to enjoy it.

“No more big wars, anyway,” said The.

“Agribiz is shutting down,” said Gotha, scrolling through another blog. “No more farm subsidies.”

“That means no Fritos,” said The.

“And what about money?” said Cap. “Once the ATMs are empty, we’re out of luck with no bankers to refill them.”

“Who needs money!” said Gotha.

“You always liked mine,” said her father. “You spent it all on tattoos and black lipstick.”

Gotha started to slug him but didn’t. “I’m giving it up,” she said, lowering her fist.

“Good. That’s the Christian way,” said The.

“The Christian Way was turning the other cheek,” Vince pointed out. “That’s why her cheeks were so rosy. She looked like a clown.”

“What’s wrong with that?” asked Cap.

“My knuckles are sore anyway,” said Gotha.

“I kinda miss Fritos,” said The.

ONE WEEK LATER

“I’m bored,” said Cap. “The airlines are all shut down. I’m a pilot without a plane.”

“What about me?” said Vince. “I’m a TV newsman without a network.”

“I’m a preacher, but I have no congregation,” said The.

“Quit your whining,” said Gotha. “It’s only for seven years. Then the world comes to an end.”

“She’s right!” said The, thumping his Bible. “When Jesus comes back, He’ll take us all to Heaven. Some of us anyway.”

“Don’t pack your best suit,” Cap said. “You’re going to Hell for fooling with my wife.”

“That’s a lie,” said The. “We never went below the waist, on her, anyway.”

“Seven years is a long time,” Vince said, eager to change the subject. “What do we do in the meantime?”

“Let’s start a rock band!” said Gotha.

“A rock band has to have a cool name,” Vince pointed out.

ONE WEEK LATER

"I've got it!" said Gotha. "We can call ourselves the Tribs."

"Good idea," said Cap. "If I can learn to unhook a bra with two fingers, I can learn to play a strat."

"I was a news anchor," said Vince. "I can play bass."

"I'll be the drummer," said The. "There's a drum machine in the back of Snoop Dogg's overturned Escalade out on the freeway."

"If we have a drum machine we won't need a drummer," Vince pointed out.

"Somebody has to turn it on and off," said The. "And every rock band needs a niggah."

"African-American," said Gotha.

"Whatever," said The.

6.9 YEARS LATER

"Another Grammy!" said Cap. "My fingertips are sore."

"I'm getting sick of these lame award ceremonies," said The. "No red carpet, no parties..."

"No record company suits," Vince pointed out. "And no TV. No Joan Rivers."

They were in Hollywood, lounging around an empty pool filled with trash.

"Quit your whining," said Gotha. She was not only the lead vocalist of the Tribs, she was also the manager. "We needed that award. I'm going after the biggest gig of the year."

"Opening for the Stones?" asked Cap. "I hear they're doing another Farewell Tour."

“Bigger than that,” said Gotha, firing up the band’s big black BMW boxer. “Get on, or in. Let’s go!”

DOWN THE ROAD

“I don’t see why we have to drive all the way across the country,” said Cap. “Can’t we just book the gig by phone?”

“There are no phones,” Gotha reminded him. “And we need to meet personally with the World Leader. He’s planning a big to-do at Burning Man. With any luck, the Tribs will be the opening band for his first Personal Appearance.”

“First and last,” said The. “He’s the Anti-Christ! His time is almost over. Plus he’s evil.”

“Look on the bright side,” said Gotha. “He’s made the world a better place, what with World Citizenship and all. He can’t be all bad.”

“I’m inclined to agree,” said Vince. He often found himself agreeing with Gotha. They were an item. He rode on the back of the BMW, behind her. Her father and The Preacherman were stuffed into the sidecar, taking turns sitting on each other’s lap.

“What about all this trash?” asked Cap.

“And all these buffalo?” asked The.

The road was cluttered with debris, and the traffic was often blocked by herds of buffalo. But there wasn’t all that much traffic anyway.

“Buffalo are cool,” said Gotha, swerving to avoid a herd which was fleeing Indians on horseback, who were intent on eating their livers since the casinos all were closed.

“She has a point,” said Vince. “Even with the Tribulation, life is better for the buffalo, and for the Indians as well.”

“I have to admit,” said Cap, who was raised on a farm, “that the countryside is prettier without all that agribiz.”

“I miss Fritos,” said The. “But it is true that things are better for Black folks, since the prisons have all shut down. No cops, no guards, no War on Drugs.”

“And all the thug rappers Raptured,” added Gotha, lighting a joint without slowing down and passing it to Vince.

FURTHER DOWN THE ROAD

“Ow!” said Cap.

He had just been beaned by a hailstone. They were as big as baseballs.

“I told you to wear a helmet,” said Gotha. They were speeding across Indiana. It looked exactly the same as before the Rapture, except for the size of the hailstones.

“The Tribulation means terrible weather,” said The, covering his head with his Bible. “Storms and floods and plagues and fires. You can’t say we weren’t warned.”

“You mean WE can’t say YOU weren’t warned,” Vince pointed out. “We never believed in any of it, remember?”

“Look on the bright side,” said Gotha. “What about those tornados that took out all the Wal-Marts? That was cool!”

“I could have done without the locust plague that ate up Las Vegas,” said Cap. “I had two unused buffet comps for the Flamingo.”

“I could have done without the tsunami that washed across Florida,” said The. “They had a discount for clergy at the Magic Kingdom.”

“And we both have to pee,” said Cap.

“Quit complaining and cross your legs,” said Gotha. “We’ll be in New York in sixteen hours.”

SIXTEEN HOURS LATER

The UN building was surrounded by barbed wire and security guards with AK-47s. They all had the same badge number: 666.

“No pasarán,” they said when the Tribs approached the main gate.

“That’s Spanish,” said The. “It means ‘Forget it. Turn around and go home. Beware the Anti-Christ!’”

“Are you sure?” asked Gotha. “We’ve come all this way.”

“Positive,” said The. “I had a multi-cultural congregation in the Kristal Cathedral days. I speak three languages.”

“I’m impressed,” said Vince. “English, Spanish and what?”

“Ebonics. Not much call for it these days, with all the thug rappers gone. Sorta like Yiddish.”

“No pasarán!” repeated the security guards.

“We’ve come all this way,” said Gotha, gritting her teeth. “I say we bum-rush the joint.”

SUDDENLY

“Let them through,” said a sweet voice.

Cap was amazed. It was Amy, his former First Class Flight Attendant.

“What are you doing here?” he asked, as she ushered them inside the UN, to the World Leader’s Private Chambers.

“I’m his girl friend,” said Amy.

Cap felt a stab of jealousy. “You let him unhook your bra?” he whispered, hoping his daughter couldn’t hear.

“I heard that,” said Gotha.

“He doesn’t have to,” said Amy. “I don’t have to wear one anymore.”

MOMENTS LATER

They entered a huge room decorated all in black and red. There was no furniture, just a TV and a Mr. Coffee. And a big cardboard box with 666 on it.

“Bow to the box,” said Amy.

They all bowed to the box: even The (who kept his fingers crossed); even Vince, who believed in equality as a principle. “But when in Rome—” he muttered, as he bent a knee.

“Forget Rome,” said a Voice from inside the box. “Those dolled-up dudes are all dearly departed.”

“Good riddance,” said Gotha. “It’s a better world now, even though it’s not perfect.”

“Flattery will get you everywhere,” said The Voice from inside the box. “Come closer.”

They all inched closer. There were two little holes in one of the 6s, and Vince could see eyes inside. “This is like the Wizard of Oz,” he said.

“The Wizard of Oz was a phony,” said the Voice from Inside the Box. “I am the Real Thing. The Anti-Christ, the World Ruler, the Dark One, the Prince of Lies.”

“We know who you are, Vlad!” said The. He held his Bible in front of him, like a shield. “Show your face!” he said. “We fear you not.”

“Speak for yourself,” said Cap.

“He doesn’t like to show his face,” Amy said. “That’s why no one but me has ever seen him in person.”

“Ah, but we know his evil deeds!” said The. “His One-World government has destroyed Israel, the Promised Land. Oh, woe.”

“Oh, woe yourself,” said the Voice from the Box. “I didn’t destroy Israel, I just moved it to Europe, where it belongs.”

“It’s true,” said Vince. “I got an email from Dr. Kramer, who says his bio-gen fish are doing much better in the rich Polish soil. He’s cool with it. He was never comfortable with the idea of stealing Palestinian land.”

“So it’s OK to steal Polish land?” demanded The.

“The Poles owe us—I mean, them,” said the Voice. “So do the Ukrainians, not to mention the Germans. Besides, you can’t make an omelet without breaking legs.”

“Eggs,” said Vince.

“Whatever,” said the Voice in the Box. “Let’s don’t argue. What can I do for you?”

“He doesn’t like to argue,” said Amy.

“It’s what we can do for you,” said Gotha. “We have a proposal.”

“I don’t know proposal,” said the Voice. “You seek a boon?”

“A gig,” said Gotha. “You’ll need a band for the big to-do at Black Rock City. Your first personal appearance.”

“And last,” said The, from behind his Bible.

“Shut up, The!” hissed Gotha. “You’re in luck, Mr. Anti-Christ. The Tribs are free.”

“I’ll think about it,” said the Voice. “Show me your titties.”

“You’d better not,” said Amy.
But Gotha did. She lifted her tee shirt.
“Cute,” said the Voice. “You’ve got the job. Scale.
Now get out of here. It’s hot in this box.”

MINUTES LATER

“Sorry about that,” Gotha said, pulling down her tee shirt as Amy escorted them out to the street. “Show-biz, y’know.”

“It’s OK,” said Amy. “Just makes me look better.”

“It’s true,” said Gotha’s dad. “Hers are like ripe fruit hanging from the Tree of Life.”

Gotha felt like slugging him but didn’t.

WEEKS LATER

Gotha’s big black BMW boxer sped through the garbage and debris that littered northern Nevada. They were on their way to Black Rock City, where the Anti-Christ was scheduled to make his first public appearance.

“We’ll finally get to see his face,” said Gotha. “Close up, too, since we’ll be on stage with him. Wonder if he’s cute?”

“The Prince of Lies?” scoffed The. “The Dark One? The Anti-Christ? Cute?”

“You are always so negative,” Cap pointed out.

The ignored him. “At least we’ll only have to see his ugly mug for an instant or so. The Seven Years of Tribulation will be over tonight. If the Good Book is right, and so far it has been, Jesus will return at exactly midnight and send the Anti-Christ and all his followers straight to Hell.”

“What happens to us?” asked Vince.

“I go to Heaven for sure,” said The. “I’m a sinner, but Jesus has forgiven me. He may forgive you guys, too, and take you with Him, or He could pitch you right on down to Hell with the Anti-Christ. He can be pretty strict.”

“Can’t you put in a word?” asked Cap. “I forgave you for fooling around with my wife.”

“We never went below the waist,” The reminded him, “on her, anyway, and He’s not going to listen to me or anybody else. He may have already made up His mind, or He may decide on the spot. For all I know, you may get points for playing in a rock band.”

“Can’t we just stay here?” asked Gotha. “We have another gig next week, in Petaluma.”

“That’s just a street fair,” said The. “And besides, the world will come to an end when Jesus returns. There won’t be any Petaluma.”

“I won’t miss Petaluma,” said Vince thoughtfully. “Though I will miss the world.”

HOURS LATER

Black Rock City was a huge traffic jam of weird bicycles ridden by nudes, wobbling between cars covered with kewpie dolls, plastic ponies, beads and rhinestones.

“Art cars,” said Vince.

“Ugh,” said Gotha.

In the center of it all was a huge wicker statue that looked vaguely (that is, exactly) like Timothy Leary. Some drunks were trying to set it on fire.

“Got a light?” they asked.

The Tribs ignored them and set up on stage be-

tween two speakers shaped like gigantic skulls.

“This makes Woodstock look like a hootenanny!” said Gotha. She put her black lips up to the mike and ran a sound check: “Check 3-2-1!”

“Six six six,” boomed the echo in return.

“What’s a wood stock?” asked Cap, tuning his strat.

“What time is it?” asked Vince. It was dark. A cold wind was rising. His watch had stopped.

He shivered.

‘ROUND MIDNIGHT

A half a million people, most of them stoned, many of them nude, and all of them covered with body-paint and dust, gathered around the stage.

The Tribs were surprised to find that they were the only act. They were even more surprised when Amy appeared and handed them a playlist of only one song.

“There’s no water and only two portajohns,” she said. “Better start playing now!”

Cap struck a funky chord. Gotha approached the mike and wailed, “Please allow me to introduce myself ...”

The crowd went wild as The punched PLAY on his drum machine.

Vince picked up his bass. Behind him he saw a huge cardboard box being lowered onto the stage by a crane.

It had 666 on it.

“I am a man of wealth and taste ...”

AT MIDNIGHT

“What the...?”

The Tribs were rocking the “house” when Cap’s strat went suddenly silent; so did The’s drum machine, Vince’s bass and Gotha’s mike.

Amy had unplugged them.

It was 12:00.

The applause was deafening.

The silence that followed was even more so.

The box in the center of the stage was slowly lifting, as if by magic. The crowd gasped as they saw the slim figure sitting in a lotus position underneath it.

He stood, and the crowd gasped again.

There was no mistaking that gentle, wise face, those scratchy robes, that crown of thorns.

“Jesus Christ!” exclaimed Cap.

“Bingo,” said Jesus, with a smile.

“It was you all along!” said The, falling to his knees.

“Rise up, faithful dude,” said Jesus, helping him to his feet. “It was and it wasn’t me. Think of it as a yin-yang thing. I’ll explain later. But first, I’ve got one last job to do.”

He grabbed the dead mike stand and, swinging it like a club, ran through the parked cars that surrounded the stage, sending kewpie dolls and plastic ponies, beads and rhinestones flying.

Then he climbed back onto the stage and cast the mike stand aside.

“A little action is good for the soul,” He said. “I haven’t had so much fun since I trashed the temple. Imagine gluing all that shit on a car!”

“He likes cars,” said Amy.

“Whatever,” said Gotha. “But what now? Is it Heaven or Hell for us?”

“Neither,” said Jesus, spreading His arms wide and addressing the crowd. He didn’t need a mike; everyone could hear Him just fine.

“Listen up, humankind,” He said. “Here’s the deal. The Earth is yours, but you have to pick up all this garbage and quit trashing it. Share everything equally. No more rich and poor.”

“That’s communism!” shouted someone from the crowd.

“Bingo,” said Jesus. “It’s never been properly tried, and now it’s up to you all to make it happen. Just follow these simple rules.”

“Rules?” said Gotha. She didn’t like rules.

“The Ten Commandments,” said The. “I told you He was strict!”

“Pay attention,” said Amy.

“I’ve trimmed the list,” said Jesus. “It’s the Three Commandments now. Listen up:

1. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

2. Love your neighbor as yourself.

3. No more art cars.

“What about Heaven?” asked The, clearly disappointed. “What about Eternal Life and the forgiveness of sins?”

Jesus hugged him. “I forgave you all long ago, dude. Especially you! And you wouldn’t like Heaven, not after playing in a rock band. It’s a white bread scene. I have to go there and hang out, since my Old Man’s expecting me, but you’ll have a better time here. Promise.”

“What happened to all those who were Raptured,” asked Vince. He was starting to feel like a news-

man again, looking for answers.

“Let’s just say that they were recycled,” said Jesus. He pulled a bag from under his scratchy robes and handed it to Amy. “Pass these wafers around.”

They were like animal crackers with human faces.

“They taste like Fritos!” said The.

“They taste funny to me,” said Cap.

“They’re not so bad,” said Amy, tossing handfuls to the crowd. “Once you get started you can’t stop eating them.”

“So the Rapture was just a way to get all the bad elements out of the way so we could begin to make the world better?” said Vince, munching on a Murdoch.

“Bingo,” said Jesus. “And this Rapture wasn’t the first Rapture. What do you think happened to all those dinosaurs?”

“Those *other* dinosaurs, you mean,” said Gotha. “But I have one more question. Who folded all those clothes?”

“Mary Magdalene,” said Jesus. “She takes care of the domestic stuff.”

“First I’ve heard about a Mary,” muttered Amy. “I’m outta here.”

And she was.

SEVERAL HOURS LATER

The sun was rising. It looked new every day, but it looked especially new today, Vince thought.

After a long round of hugs, handshakes and autographs in Aramaic, the immense crowd had followed Jesus to the center of Black Rock City. There they watched in solemn silence as He climbed to the top of the Leary-looking wicker man.

“He’s not wearing anything under that scratchy robe,” said Gotha, admiringly.

“So?” asked Vince, resentfully.

“So, he’s kinda cute.”

“Don’t leave us!” the crowd shouted. They were waving little lighted crosses.

“Please!” said Jesus, looking pained, “put those things away!” He spread His arms and balanced on the head of the wicker man. “It’s time for me to say so long. I love you all to death, but I’ve got to split and I won’t be back. I’ve got other worlds to attend to.”

The crowd moaned. He stopped them with one raised hand.

“It’s up to you now. Don’t blow it. Love one another. Get to work building a decent world and make me proud.” He looked around. “You can begin by picking up all this trash.”

“But who will rule us!?” the crowd shouted.

“You’ll have to rule yourselves,” said Jesus. “You’ve already started. Keep it up. The Three Commandments are right there in the Good Book.”

He pointed down at The, who was holding up his Bible.

“Two of them, anyway. And for the day-to-day practical stuff—“

He reached into His robe and pulled out a cell phone, a nifty little Nokia, and tossed it down toward Gotha.

“If you get confused or need advice, call her.”

“Me?” said Gotha, catching the phone. “Why me?”

“Why not?” said Jesus. “You’re cute, you’re smart, and you have a program.”

“I do?”

“Sure. ‘From each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs.’ You studied Marxism in college, didn’t you?”

“You did?” asked Vince, impressed.

“I went to Berkeley,” said Gotha. “I told Dad it was a music school.”

“I just thought you misspelled it,” said Cap.

“There He goes!” said The, blinking back a happy tear.

And indeed, there He went—straight up into the stars.

SIXTY-SIX YEARS LATER

“Enough with the autographs,” said Gotha. “Get on the train.”

“The fans expect it,” said The. “And this damned ball point keeps skipping.”

“Nobody said it would be a perfect world,” Vince pointed out. “Just a better one.”

Even in their old age, the Tribs were still packing them in, thanks to Cap’s cascading guitar solos, The’s afro-beat drum machine, and Vince’s rock-solid bass anchor.

Not to mention Gotha’s wild vocals.

“Sometimes I’m afraid we’re going to live forever after all,” she groaned, settling into her seat as the train got underway. She was almost eighty (she had quit lying about her age) and her tattoos were so wavy with wrinkles that a skull might look like a heart. They were still in interesting places, though.

She and Vince were still an item. They often brought their grandchildren along when they played gigs in two-bit burgs like Denver and Des Moines. It made life on the road more fun.

“Eternal Life would suit me,” said Cap. He was almost a hundred. “Maybe I could finally get those Hendrix licks down.”

“Eternal Life is a metaphor,” said The, thumping his worn Bible. “Jesus was speaking in parables. Don’t ask me why.”

“Cause He could?” suggested Gotha.

“We have our season, like all creatures on this planet,” said Vince, who was realistic as always but no longer cynical. “And then it’s done. I wouldn’t want it any other way. If our biggest ambition was to hang around some Heaven forever, we wouldn’t have taken care of this planet for our children. And grandchildren.”

“And great-grandchildren,” said Cap, who was tenderly watching one smear snot on his strat.

“Enough!” said Gotha, shooing three kids off her old, bony, but still cute lap. “I need a nap. You kids go look out the window at the scenery—or something.”

The engineer blew the whistle just for fun. The kids ran to the window to watch for buffalo.

Vince held Gotha’s hand while she slept. He looked over the children, out the window, at the passing scenery.

Or something, indeed, he thought:

Fish in the ponds, corn in the fields, cattle on the hillsides, and the whole sweet world gliding by, slowly, out of sight.

Pace

SPECIAL RELATIVITY

A ONE-ACT PLAY IN THREE SCENES

CHARACTERS:

EINSTEIN elderly white man
ROBESON elderly black man
HOOVER elderly white man

WILL young white man
CLAIRE young white woman
DOUG young white man
MALCOLM young black man
ANNIE young white women
FRED elderly white man

KIDS
ACTIVISTS
COPS

SETTING:

A suburban New Jersey backyard in the PRESENT DAY.

AT RISE:

Big old house in BG, with stairs to second floor deck. A table in the yard holds food and drink as if for a party. High board fence with a door, stage right. Three lawn chairs under a scrawny tree.

Punkily dressed young ACTIVISTS are milling around, all in their twenties and thirties. Most but not all are white. A few are mothers (and fathers) with children. Several are working on a banner. Others sit on steps eating sandwiches or drinking beer. Others talk on cell phones. There is a general air of purposeful confusion.

SCENE ONE

Two young activists carry the banner across the stage: NEW JERSEY SAYS NO TO PATRIOT ACT. It temporarily obscures the lawn chairs. When we see the chairs again an old man has appeared in the center one, as if magically. It is EINSTEIN, in need of a haircut and shabbily dressed in a worn cardigan and baggy pants.

EINSTEIN sits awkwardly in the lawnchair. It starts to fold up on him, and he struggles to straighten it. It presents an intractable problem in non-Euclidean geometry.

WILL (a pierced and tattooed young man in anarchist black) notices and comes over to help.

WILL

Hey, Einstein. Need some help?

EINSTEIN

(startled; dazed)

You know me?

WILL

Just kidding, old timer. You look like, you know, the atom bomb guy.

EINSTEIN winces at this, but accepts WILL's help, straightening the chair.

WILL

You must be Annie's grandpa. Hey, man, thanks for letting us use your place.

EINSTEIN

Me? Well, not exactly ...

EINSTEIN examines the chair and sits, still dazed.

WILL

Can I get you something? We have organic fruit juice. We have microbrews.

EINSTEIN

No, thanks. I'm fine. Just need to catch my breath.

WILL

(departing)

I know what you mean. Beautiful day, huh?

EINSTEIN

They're all beautiful.

EINSTEIN smiles and looks around. The action is non-stop. No one pays him any attention. After a moment he looks at the other two lawn chairs: empty. He seems disappointed.

A little boy and girl are playing with a toy airplane. They bring it to him and he straightens the wing and throws it. It circles the stage (magically) and they follow it, delighted. No one else notices.

EINSTEIN looks at the other chairs again, expectantly: still empty. He searches his pockets and pulls out a large pocket watch. He taps it, just as two activists are

dragging a huge, ugly GEORGE BUSH puppet across the stage, temporarily obscuring the lawn chair to his right.

When we see it again, an elderly black man has appeared in the chair, wearing a pin-striped suit and open-necked shirt (no tie). It's ROBESON, still virile and handsome at seventy.

ROBESON

What the hell?

EINSTEIN

(putting watch away)

Aha! Mr. Robeson!

ROBESON looks at EINSTEIN and his face breaks into a huge grin. ROBESON half rises but he's too big for his chair and it rises with him. They manage to shake hands anyway.

ROBESON

Doctor Einstein. What an unexpected pleasure! What a totally unexpected pleasure!

EINSTEIN

Please, it's Albert. We have met, you know.

ROBESON

Indeed, we have. And it's Paul, please.
(he sits back down and looks around, puzzled)
And is this your doing? (grins) You old rascal. Is this allowed, to come back from the dead?

EINSTEIN

It's what you might call a singularity. I worked it out in my spare time, which has been considerable of late.

ROBESON

Tell me about it. Being dead is a bit of a bore. Not that I'm complaining. Where the hell are we?

EINSTEIN

Not hell, please. Don't you recognize your home town?

ROBESON

Ah! Princeton. Of course, why not? This wasn't exactly my part of town. But I get the idea. Your home town, too.

EINSTEIN

Home? The world is my home, Paul, or was. But this is a very nice part of it, is it not? I especially enjoyed the summers, even though they were a little hot.

ROBESON

Still are!

ROBESON manages to get out of his chair. He stands and stretches operatically. Wiggles his fingers, delighted that they work. Pulls a handkerchief from his suit pocket. His huge figure temporarily obscures the third lawn chair.

When ROBESON sits back down, wiping his brow, we see that another figure has appeared, again as if magically. It is HOOVER, in the third lawn chair, wearing a frumpy dress and brown men's shoes. No one notices or remarks on his dress.

HOOVER
(frowning)

Hot? What the hell do you know about hot?

ROBESON

Him!? What is he doing here?

(to EINSTEIN, accusingly)

Is this your doing, too? Is this your idea of a joke?

EINSTEIN

No, no, Paul. He wasn't my first choice, but I was curious.

HOOVER

(pulling his dress down over his knees)

I know you! I know you both.

ROBESON

You damn well should! You and your brown-shoed hirelings dogged us both for years! (a beat) I see you at least got the shoes right.

EINSTEIN

J. Edgar was such a part of both our lives. I thought you might interested in meeting him face to face, so to speak, as am I.

ROBESON

Such creatures hold little interest for me.
(turns away from HOOVER, facing EINSTEIN)

But I suppose he could be helpful, if we intend to reminisce. After all, he knows where we went and what we did and who we spoke with, and who we hung out with.

HOOVER

Communists all.

EINSTEIN

I admired you as a public figure, Paul, but I wanted to get together with you as a man. As a music lover, too. But except for that one afternoon we spent together here in Princeton—

ROBESON

That was a lovely day. It was 1955, wasn't it?

HOOVER

July 11th, 1954.

ROBESON

It's almost like having a private secretary, isn't it? But we met once before. You came backstage, after Othello. It was such an honor! I must say, that play made me more nervous than anything I did.

EINSTEIN

It didn't show on stage, Paul. But I always loved your music more.

HOOVER

(scornful)

Music. You call Soviet marching songs music? And darkie spirituals?

ROBESON

(dismissively, over his shoulder)

Yes, sir! I do—or did. Say, Albert, are we in the past tense here? Or the present?

EINSTEIN

(studying his watch again)

I'm not sure, Paul. Quite frankly I'm a little surprised that all this worked. It was just a theory, running through my head when I died. One of my regrets was that I hadn't spent another afternoon with you. And the other was that I never achieved the Unified Field theory. But apparently ...

HOOVER

Apparently what? You have suspended the laws of Space and Time? On what authority?

ROBESON

Authority. Always authority. I see what you mean, Albert. He's sort of entertaining.

HOOVER

I'll thank you not to refer to me in the third person. I'm here—just as strangely, I admit. But just as much here as you are.

ROBESON

And just as unsuitable for polite company as ever.

(back to EINSTEIN)

So this is the result of your theory? Bringing three old men back from the dead?

EINSTEIN

(putting watch away)

Only for an afternoon. And it's not a theory, really, but a singularity, as I said. A one-time event.

ROBESON

(relaxing in his chair)

Well, I thank you for inviting me. I guess Genius has its privileges.

EINSTEIN

Genius! You know, Paul, I always felt that what the world called genius was just *eigensinn*, stubbornness. I never quit working on the Unified Field. I guess this is a reward of sorts. (dreamily) I admit I was tempted to use it for an afternoon of sailing alone—

ROBESON

Yes, that was always your great pleasure.

EINSTEIN

But death is so much like sailing alone.

ROBESON

It is, isn't it? And I never even sailed before.

(looks around) But say, what are all these young folks doing here?

EINSTEIN

I don't know. It looks like some kind of protest.

ROBESON

Ah! A protest! Excellent!

HOOVER perks up and starts looking around, gimlet-eyed. EINSTEIN tries to get the attention of a passing young woman but she ignores him.

It's CLAIRE, barefoot, in a long dress. ROBESON grabs her sleeve.

ROBESON

Excuse me, young lady. What exactly are you protesting?

CLAIRE

Why, everything. Oh, you mean me in particular?

(suddenly flirtatious, responding to his charisma)

It's to free Mumia. To free Palestine. To free political prisoners. To pull out of Iraq. For gay rights. To save affirmative action and social security. Global warming—

Other young activists notice and gather around: WILL, from before; MALCOLM, a young Black man with dreads; and DOUG, a gay guy in an ACT-UP tank top and beads.

EINSTEIN

Palestine? Isn't it Israel now?

CLAIRE

(still fixated on ROBESON)

We've pulled together a hundred groups.
It's not every day that Bush comes to New
Jersey.

HOOVER

(alert)

Who's this Bush?

WILL

President Bush. Where've you been?

HOOVER

(grimly)

Young man, you don't want to know.

DOUG

(stepping forward, suspicious)

Say, what's this all about? Who are you guys?

WILL

They're with Einstein there. He's Annie's
grandpa. Right?

CLAIRE

(suspicious)

I don't think so.

MALCOLM

(also suspicious)

Annie'll be here soon. We can ask her. But I think she said her grandfather was in the old folks home.

(EINSTEIN groans)

I mean, a nursing home. A senior center.

EINSTEIN

(to himself)

Sailing alone around the world.

DOUG

Say, this is too weird. Where'd these guys come from? (to WILL) I thought they were with you.

WILL

They're not with me!

MALCOLM

Maybe they're police spies.

HOOVER

(looking pleased, pointing at EINSTEIN and ROBESON)

Bingo.

ROBESON

Whoa! He's up to his old tricks. Sowing division and distrust.

ROBESON stands up, suddenly filling the stage. Other young people gather around, joining the group.

ROBESON

Ladies and gentlemen, we are not police agents. Far from it. Except for him, and he's currently, happily, unemployed. And not really part of our party.

HOOVER

(sulking)

You can say that again.

ROBESON

We're here not to hinder but to help you. We were activists ourselves in our own day. Quite active, in fact.

MALCOLM

(shaking his head)

That's what they all say. Hell, that's what my parents say.

ROBESON

Maybe you should listen to your parents, son. At any rate, we were brought here today by the good offices of this gentleman. The man this man (points to WILL) called Einstein actually is Albert Einstein.

WILL

No way!

CLAIRE

He does look like him. (bends down, as if talking to a child) What does E equal?

EINSTEIN

(slyly)

I always made it a policy never to memorize anything that could be easily looked up.

ROBESON

It's MC squared and he knows it! He's having fun with you. This is Albert Einstein, the world's most famous scientist.

EINSTEIN

(waving a hand)

Not any more, Paul, surely. At least one would hope not.

ROBESON

His genius brought us all here. Haven't you kids heard of Relativity?

CLAIRE turns and runs up the back stairs into the house, as if she just remembered something important.

DOUG

Not possible. Einstein is dead.

EINSTEIN

Not an impossibility but an improbability, for sure. That's the problem with Quantum Theory. Improbabilities keep cropping up. (examines his hands) But I must admit, I'm getting won over to it at last.

ROBESON
(still declaiming)

Not only a great scientist but a great humanitarian, as well. We worked together on many campaigns, starting with the Spanish Civil War.

WILL
Spanish Civil War?

EINSTEIN
Actually long before that, Paul. I was proud to be a co-signer with you of several petitions concerning the Scottsboro Boys.

MALCOLM
The who boys? Sounds like a rap group.

WILL
Or a bluegrass group.

HOOVER
Nigger rapists, Commie dupes.

ROBESON
(making a fist)
Watch your mouth! Innocent victims of Southern racism, sentenced to death for a crime they never committed.

MALCOLM
Like Mumia Abu Jamal.

DOUG

That's Philadelphia racism.

MALCOLM

Same thing.

ROBESON

Correct, young man! Up south or down south, same thing, I learned that personally. At any rate, Dr. Einstein, who you see before you, in the flesh—I think—was not only a great scientist but a great humanitarian. Perhaps that's the same thing as well!

EINSTEIN

Oh, no, Paul. You flatter me and my colleagues. But it's true, I took part in that and many campaigns. I could do no less.

DOUG

I still say they might be spies.

HOOVER

Better check them out. Better check out all of your people. You never know.

ROBESON

Don't listen to him. Security is a real issue for political activists, but divisive rumors are often fomented by the FBI in order to...

ROBESON trails off when he sees everyone turning to look toward the house. CLAIRE is running down the stairs, waving a tee shirt.

CLAIRE

I have evidence! We can find out if he's telling the truth.

She hands Einstein the tee shirt, and he obligingly pulls it on over his sweater. It has a picture of Albert Einstein, and under it, the formula, $E=MC^2$. Apparently it's all the evidence these young people need.

WILL

Well, I'll be damned. It is Albert Einstein!
And I knew it all along.

CLAIRE

How did you do it? You traveled through Time!

EINSTEIN

(looking at his watch again, then putting it away)

That was the easy part. It was doing it while dead that presented the more interesting problem. But I can assure you, it won't be occurring again. It's strictly a singularity.

WILL

(to ROBESON)

So who does that make you, Jackie Robinson?

ROBESON

I beg your pardon! Do we all look that much alike to you?

EINSTEIN

No, no, this man I had the pleasure of bringing here with me is Paul Robeson, the great Negro singer and actor—and activist. A man who stood up for justice, not only for his own people, but for all the people in the world.

HOOVER

(muttering)

In other words, a Red. A card-carrying Communist.

ROBESON

Prove it, you two-bit gumshoe! (a beat) Not that there's anything wrong with that.

The young people all laugh at this Seinfeld line. ROBESON and EINSTEIN wonder why, but let it pass.

MALCOLM

It's true! I thought he looked familiar. My grandmother had his picture on her wall, right next to Martin Luther King.

HOOVER

Another Communist.

EINSTEIN

(slyly)

You young people know what a Communist is, don't you? It's anyone who demands equal rights for Negroes, especially here in the United States.

MALCOLM

(insulted)

Knee-grows?

CLAIRE

Paul Robeson. I think I read about you in school. But aren't you dead too?

ROBESON

Only a rumor, my dear. (laughs) Unfortunately, one of the more accurate ones.

MALCOLM

My granny said you were a giant. I always thought you would be bigger.

ROBESON

(stands, smiling, and puts his arm around
MALCOLM)

I always thought I was bigger too, son. Still do, I guess.

EINSTEIN

You still are, Paul. And were. The biggest, bravest man I ever met. Made me proud to be a human being, when so many others—

(indicates HOOVER, who sulks)

—were busy trying to make us ashamed of our common humanity.

DOUG

So who's he? Why's he here?

ROBESON

Good question!

HOOVER

Common is right!

ROBESON

(scornful; sits back down)

A traffic cop with delusions of grandeur.
Wanted to be the Grand Inquisitor.

HOOVER

Not a colored entertainer, or a Jewish egg-head, like these two. I built the world's greatest police force, the pride of America. The FBI.

MALCOLM

(laughing)

The FBI? That clown show? You mean the guys who couldn't catch the Atlanta bomber when he was hiding in his own home town?

DOUG

(sarcastic)

Oh, come on, Malcolm, be fair. It was a town of 1,600. That's a lot of people!

MALCOLM

(getting into it, 'hides' behind the skinny tree)
And it was surrounded by trees. Have you ever tried to find somebody who was hiding behind a tree?

They all laugh. HOOVER declines to notice.

HOOVER

Apparently things have gone downhill.
Who's running the agency now?

Nobody knows. The young people all look at one another and shrug.

HOOVER

(preening)

Perhaps that's the problem. There was a time when everyone knew who was the Director of the FBI.

ROBESON

I'll grant you that, you wicked old bastard.
Your ugly mug was on almost as many magazines as my own.

EINSTEIN

Or mine.

HOOVER

(smugly; straightening his skirt)

Perception is everything.

EINSTEIN

That's what Schrodinger said. I always disagreed, though I'm beginning to see feel like one of his cats. (pats HOOVER's hand)
But you must see, J. Edgar, that you built on sand.

ROBESON

Sand? Shit, you mean!

Enter ANNIE, a young woman with spiked hair and anarchist regalia. She comes in through the door in the high board fence, stage right, closing it carefully behind her.

ANNIE

Listen up, people! Nassau Street is already crawling with cops, with riot gear, shields and helmets, and—hey, what's up? Who are these guys?

DOUG and MALCOLM pull her aside and tell her, in whispers. She looks uncertain, studies EINSTEIN. Apparently the tee shirt is proof positive.

ANNIE

It's true. My God. Dr. Einstein! (she shakes his hand) My grandfather and him were friends. I wish Grandpa could see this.

EINSTEIN

(sadly)

My best friend, Fred. I was hoping he was dead and could join us. That was actually my original intention.

ROBESON and HOOVER both look surprised.

EINSTEIN

With you and me, Paul. You would have loved the man. When I found out Fred

wasn't quite dead, I made a last minute substitution. (pats HOOVER's hand) No offense.

HOOVER pulls his hand away and straightens his skirt again.

HOOVER

Offend away. You think I asked to be part of your commie club?

ANNIE

You know, sometimes Grandpa wishes he was dead too. It's sad. He's in the nursing home.

EINSTEIN

I know. Sailing alone around the world.

MALCOLM

(proprietary)

And this is Paul Robeson.

ANNIE notices ROBESON for the first time.

ANNIE

It is! I've seen his pictures.

ROBESON

(drolly)

Not those dreadful movies, I hope.

EINSTEIN

I think she means photographs, Paul.

ANNIE

There's one on the wall upstairs. My God, Mr. Robeson! (pumping his hand with both of hers) Grandpa never met you but he talked about you all the time. You were his hero. (to her friends) This is so cool! It's like, mystical!

EINSTEIN

No, no, my child. It's just a quantum singularity. As I explained ...

HOOVER, still unnoticed, sits sulking. DOUG stands behind him and points down at his head.

DOUG

This other one here's apparently some kind of cop.

ANNIE

Of course! J. Edgar Hoover? (to EINSTEIN) But I don't get it. Where the hell did he come from?

HOOVER

(grimly)

Young lady, you don't want to know.

ANNIE

Well, whatever. (to ROBESON and EINSTEIN) But we're being so rude. Please excuse us, we're planning for a big demonstration today. (points to the table) Can we get you something?

ROBESON

Don't let us interfere with your righteous work. (wipes his brow) But a beer would be nice.

WILL

(hurrying off)

We have microbrews!

EINSTEIN

A white wine would be nice. (politely turns to HOOVER) And for our friend here—

HOOVER

Friend! (petulantly straightens his skirt) Hardly. But I guess I could do with a martini.

ANNIE

Uh—a martini? Uh...

HOOVER

I'll have a fruit juice, then.

ANNIE, the good hostess, starts for the drink table, then stops and looks back at HOOVER with distaste.

ANNIE

It's organic. Is that OK?

STAGE GOES DARK

SCENE TWO

LIGHTS UP on SAME SCENE, a little later. EINSTEIN is lighting his pipe. CLAIRE looks on, shocked, but doesn't say anything. HOOVER sniffs his juice suspiciously. ROBESON takes a drink of beer and frowns; examines the bottle.

ROBESON

What is this stuff? Home brew?

WILL

Microbrew. We have lots of little breweries, each with its own distinctive flavor.

ROBESON

We had better stuff during prohibition, son.

EINSTEIN

Paul, please. The wine is very good. You say it's from California? Astonishing.

HOOVER

You are easily astonished.

EINSTEIN

An important quality for a scientist. Especially a theoretical scientist. So tell us, what's this protest about?

CLAIRE

Lots of stuff. Invasions of other countries, the Patriot Act. The government is spying

on people, arresting them without warrants, trampling on freedom of speech.

ROBESON

What else is new? That's what government does, my dear. This one, anyway.

MALCOLM

It's not supposed to. But since 9-11 they've gone ballistic.

HOOVER

9-11? What's this 9-11? A new law?

DOUG

Terrorism. Islamic fundamentalists flew airliners into skyscrapers in New York, killing 3,000 people.

ROBESON

(shaking his head)

The only fundamentalists we had to worry about were the Christians.

EINSTEIN

Oh dear. And why?

MALCOLM

They hate us. Because we support Israel.

ANNIE

We don't support Israel. The government supports Israel.

EINSTEIN

But don't we all support Israel?

CLAIRE

You're a Zionist? (hands him a newspaper)
You support this?

EINSTEIN

(pained)

Israeli tanks? These are Israeli soldiers? Oh dear. They look like—storm troopers.

DOUG

(looking over his shoulder)

They are storm troopers. That tank is knocking down a Palestinian home.

MALCOLM

Collective punishment. Ethnic cleansing.

EINSTEIN

This is ghastly. Israeli storm troopers. I was afraid of this. You know, Paul, they once wanted me to be president of Israel.

ROBESON

I know.

EINSTEIN

I almost wish I had never come back to see this. Jews occupying another's land. The racist attitudes toward the Arab inhabitants always troubled me ...

CLAIRE

The Palestinians.

EINSTEIN

The Palestinians. We Jews were once Palestinians, you know. But then this idea, of casting the Arabs out of the land, of making a religious state ... It was not right.

ROBESON

Apartheid. Like South Africa.

MALCOLM

There is no more Apartheid. South Africa is free. Black ruled.

ROBESON

There's an advance! So Africa is coming together at last.

MALCOLM

Well, not exactly.

He hands ROBESON a newspaper.

ROBESON

Africa too! (shakes his head) What kind of world have we left you kids?

HOOVER

Africa. What do you expect from naked savages?

ROBESON

(making a fist)

Watch your tongue old man. Or—

HOOVER

Or you'll what? Your threats mean nothing to me.

ROBESON

Nor yours to me. Never did!

EINSTEIN

Gentlemen, please! We're dead, remember? Let bygones be bygones.

HOOVER

You never went to Africa anyway. You only talked about it.

ROBESON

It's true. I always liked my creature comforts. But how could I go? You took away my passport.

HOOVER

That was the State Department.

ROBESON

Bullshit! You were behind every act of repression: you, with your thin smirk.

HOOVER

You could have left any time. (sarcastic) You were the great international Negro.

ROBESON

I could have left. But never returned to the US.

HOOVER

What did you care? You always hated America.

ROBESON

I loved America. I just wanted it to live up to its dream. And my people are as much American as yours are. More so. We built this country with our unpaid labor.

HOOVER

Hear that, kids? That's commie talk. Straight from the horse's mouth

EINSTEIN

Gentlemen! J. Edgar, you're not drinking your juice.

HOOVER

It tastes funny.

ROBESON

(regarding him)

Since when don't you like funny?

EINSTEIN

(to WILL)

Young man, perhaps you could bring our companion here a white wine, like mine. It's very nice on a summer day. California, you say?

HOOVER is handed the wine. He tastes it approvingly, and pours the fruit juice onto the ground. Then he opens his purse and pulls out a cigar.

CLAIRE

Uh—excuse me! You can't smoke here.

HOOVER ignores her and lights up. Points to EINSTEIN with his cigar.

HOOVER

He's smoking.

ANNIE

That's different; it's a pipe. It smells good.

HOOVER

Tell it to Winston Churchill, kid. Or FDR. Besides— (points to two activists on the steps sharing a joint) They're smoking too.

DOUG

Not tobacco.

ROBESON

True. What's that sweet hemp smell? A little maryjane?

HOOVER

The Negro has a documented weakness for the devil weed.

ROBESON

Negro yourself. I learned to smoke marijuana

from white folks. I was in show business, remember? But of course you do. You forget nothing.

WILL runs and gets a joint from the two smoking on the steps. Offers it to ROBESON.

WILL

Want a hit?

ROBESON

Not while he's around. It's for relaxing—
with friends. (pulls out a pack of cigarettes)
I could do with a light, I suppose.

CLAIRE

(shocked)

You'll get cancer!

ROBESON

(rolling his eyes)

Darling, let me tell you ...

ANNIE

It's OK, I guess. They're from another era.
When everybody did it.

EINSTEIN

Not everybody. Eleanor, FDR's wife, didn't
smoke.

HOOVER

She sneaked them. Sneaked other things,
too. You were all a bunch of sneaks.

ROBESON

And you were the tattle-tale. The teacher's pet.

HOOVER

The teacher, you mean.

ROBESON

You wish, you yuppie little troll.

EINSTEIN

Gentlemen, please! (to the young people)
Don't let us distract you. I know you have work to do. Your protest. Justice in Palestine. Certainly. And what else?

MALCOLM

And Iraq. The US is occupying Iraq.

DOUG

They invaded for the oil!

EINSTEIN

Invasion? What about the UN? They were especially set up to stop such things.

CLAIRE

The UN? Well, uh

ROBESON

What about the Soviet Union? They surely will not allow such international capitalist piracy to go unpunished.

MALCOLM

There is no Soviet Union. Not any more.

ROBESON drops his cigarette. Picks it up.

ROBESON

Say that again.

CLAIRE

The Soviet Union sort of fell apart. It's gone.
Now there's just Russia, and Ukraine.

DOUG

And Lithuania, and Chechnya, and—

ROBESON

No Soviet Union? No wonder the world's
in such a mess. This is worse than I ever
imagined.

MALCOLM

Now instead of the war on Communism
we have the war on Terrorism. It justifies
everything, including the Patriot Act.

HOOVER

At least someone is still on their toes.

ROBESON

On *our* toes, you mean. So this Patriot Act,
this last refuge of scoundrels, justifies spying
on people, restricting travel, arrests without
warrants, wiretaps ...

CLAIRE

How'd you know?

ROBESON

A lucky guess. Dear girl, I know these scoundrels. They did the same to me. Took away my passport, restricted my movements, slandered me in the press. They did the same thing to Dr. EINSTEIN here. Suspected of sympathizing with Communists.

EINSTEIN

Sympathizing is all. I never would have made much of a communist, I fear. And they weren't nearly as hard on me as they were on you, Paul.

HOOVER

Because you played Santa Claus. The sweet old man. But I was onto you! I tried to let the American people know your true nature.

EINSTEIN

What? That I believed in human rights? International justice?

HOOVER

Harrumph. There's no such thing. There's just communism and freedom.

DOUG

Today it's terrorism and freedom.

EINSTEIN

It's true, though. They went easier on me.

ROBESON

You had a Nobel Prize. And a white face.
You weren't a Negro. That always helps.

EINSTEIN

Unfortunately, yes.

HOOVER

Let me get this straight. Are you two complaining because you were repressed? Or bragging because you were repressed?

ROBESON

Both, you addled old fool. I would have been ashamed not to have been hated by you and your kind.

EINSTEIN

Me too, J. Edgar. Nothing personal. It's a question of values.

HOOVER

Commie values, you mean. But what do I care. Look around. Clearly your deluded kind is still in a minority. Kids in funny outfits, protesting this and that! The fact that they are still protesting proves that we are still in charge.

ROBESON

When were the good and the brave ever in the majority? That's from Thoreau.

HOOVER

Who's Thoreau? Sounds French. I'm talking about American values. Besides, the police are on their way.

EINSTEIN

The police? How do you know?

HOOVER

Just a feeling (grins, brushing cigar ashes off his dress) In my bones.

ANNIE

It may be true. I just got a call from downtown, Nassau Street. Said the cops were doing pre-emptive raids all over town, trying to stop the demonstrations.

WILL

Does that mean they'll be coming here?

HOOVER

A sound policy indeed. Stop trouble before it starts.

CLAIRE

We're supposed to have a right to demonstrate. They can't stop us from demonstrating.

ROBESON

They will try, young lady. It's in their nature. Albert, is there anything we can do to help?

EINSTEIN

I don't know. I'm thinking ...

Suddenly a BOOMING sound is heard. Someone is banging on the door in the high board fence, Stage Right.

POLICE (OFF)

Open up! This is the police!

They all look at one another in alarm. HOOVER is smiling.

STAGE GOES DARK

SCENE THREE

SAME SCENE. The BOOMING on the door continues. All are transfixed, watching the door in the board fence shake and shudder.

WILL pinches out his joint and looks for a place to put it. ROBESON takes it from his hand.

ANNIE runs up the stairs and into the house. The BOOMING at the door in the fence continues.

POLICE (OFF)

Open up, now! Open up, in the name of the law!

ANNIE

(from top of stairs)

They're out front too! SWAT Teams everywhere.

Protesters run around, picking up kids, puppets, signs; milling in confusion. EINSTEIN pulls out his watch and studies it thoughtfully.

EINSTEIN

Let them in, before they break down Fred's fence.

MALCOLM

They'll arrest us all! They'll hold us on phony charges till the protest is ruined!

HOOVER

(gloating)

And well they should.

EINSTEIN

Maybe not. Slip out past them. They won't see you.

ROBESON

You can do that?

EINSTEIN

(tapping his watch)

I can try. Differential time-slip—

The door BURSTS OPEN and four COPS rush in, in helmets with face masks, plastic shields. They look like robots.

COP 1

Nobody moves! You are all under arrest!

The cops search the yard, unable to see the activists who are gathering up their things and slipping out the door in the fence.

HOOVER watches, relighting his cigar.

COP 2

Where'd they all go? There's nobody here!

In the confusion, EINSTEIN is calm. He puts his watch away, pleased, then takes ROBESON by the arm.

EINSTEIN

Come, Paul.

EINSTEIN pulls ROBESON with him, toward the stairs to the house.

ROBESON pauses; he opens HOOVER's purse and drops in the joint before following.

COP 2

Check inside the house! They must be hiding!

EINSTEIN and ROBESON sit halfway up the stairs and watch, unseen, as the invisible activists slip out the door.

Two cops rush past them, clomping noisily up the stairs and into the house.

HOOVER sits in his lawn chair, alarmed to see the escape. He frowns at the two cops still searching the yard as the last of the activists escape.

HOOVER

You fools! There they go! You let them all escape!

The two cops notice HOOVER and draw their guns.

COP 1

There's nobody here but this old perve.

COP 2

On the ground, sir! Do it! Now! Face down!

The two cops push HOOVER out of the chair. He falls face down.

EINSTEIN

Oh dear. They'll hurt him.

ROBESON

Not enough. They can't see us? Or hear us?

EINSTEIN

Apparently not. Or the kids either. They're gone to their protest.

The cops stand over HOOVER, guns drawn. He is flat on the ground, angry, his cigar still clenched between his teeth.

HOOVER

I'll have your badges for this! Don't you know who I am?

COP 1

(putting on latex gloves)

He's wearing a dress. He might be gay. Careful!

COP 2

Gay? He's an old man.

COP 1

Old man, hell! He's a cross-dressing pervertsite. Bet he was molesting the protestors!

Two cops (3&4) emerge from the house and clomp down the stairs, past the unseen EINSTEIN and ROBESON.

COP 3

What protestors? There's nobody inside either.

COP 4

We must have the wrong address! Let's try next door. Can't let them get away.

The cops start toward the door in the fence. Cop 2 hangs back.

COP 2

What about the pervertsite?

COP 1

Leave him! Let's go.

Cop 2 opens HOOVER's purse and holds up the joint.

COP 2

Whoa, look what I've found. We've got us a dope fiend!

HOOVER

That's not mine. Don't you know who I am? I'm on your side.

All four cops haul HOOVER roughly to his feet and cuff his hands behind his back.

COP 1

Yeah, a cross-dressing dope fiend pervesite.
You're coming with us.

HOOVER

I'm J. Edgar Hoover, you fool!

COP 1

Yeah, and I'm OJ Simpson. Come on old timer, they've been waiting for you down at the jail.

The cops hustle HOOVER, still sputtering and protesting, out the fence door.

In the confusion another old man has appeared in one of the chairs. He is asleep, wearing a bathrobe. It's FRED.

EINSTEIN and ROBESON, still on the stairs, don't notice him at first.

EINSTEIN

Did you do that, Paul? That was cruel.

ROBESON

Not cruel enough. And nothing to what you did. How'd you make us, and all those kids, invisible?

EINSTEIN

(looking at his watch)

I don't know, exactly. You know, Arthur C. Clarke once said that any sufficiently advanced technology looks like magic. I guess advanced theory looks like illusion. Smoke and mirrors.

ROBESON

Who's Arthur C. Clarke? Got a match?

They relight pipe and cigarette.

ROBESON (CONT'D)

And who's our friend down there?

EINSTEIN

My God, it's Fred! He's my friend I wanted you to meet!

EINSTEIN runs down to the sleeping man and shakes him, waking him up.

FRED

(dazed)

Albert! Is it you? This is wonderful! But you're—

EINSTEIN

I know. I'm dead. I'm taking the afternoon off.

FRED

Me too! The last thing I remember, I was at that damned nursing home, watching Oprah. She had some science fiction writer on her show, and I realized I must have died.

EINSTEIN

I'm so glad! Now we can spend the afternoon together, after all. Come, there's someone I want you to meet.

EINSTEIN pulls FRED toward the stairs.

FRED

Paul Robeson! What an honor.

They shake hands.

ROBESON

The honor is all mine. So what now, EINSTEIN?

EINSTEIN

(puzzled)

I don't know. All this has worked out so well. (he brightens) We have all afternoon, until sundown. What say we spend it listening to music? Fred has a splendid record collection.

They start up the stairs together, walking slowly: old men.

FRED

If my grand-daughter hasn't thrown my turntable away. I have all your records, Mr. Robeson.

ROBESON

Paul, please. I'm not sure I can bear hearing myself, Fred. But I'm always willing to try.

FRED

I have some French brandy, too. If my grand-daughter hasn't thrown it away. These kids today have no sense of the finer things.

ROBESON

Oh, I think they do. They're all at a protest, you know.

They pause at the upstairs door; EINSTEIN looks in.

EINSTEIN

Such a nice girl. There's the turntable! I'll put a record on while you pour us some brandy, Fred. Just a taste for me.

ROBESON

I'll have a double. Brandy's the one thing the French do well. Now I wish I'd hung onto that maryjane. Goes well with music.

FRED pulls a joint from the pocket of his bathrobe. He lights it and passes it to ROBESON.

FRED

Maryjane? Say, you are an old timer. Here, try some of this.

EINSTEIN

(looking back)

Poor J. Edgar! But he'll disappear at sunset, with the rest of us. Meanwhile ...

EINSTEIN disappears into the house.

ROBESON

(dragging on the joint)

Meanwhile, let the old troll get a taste of his own medicine. My, this is nice, Fred! Where'd you get this?

FRED

At the nursing home. It's medical marijuana.

They follow EINSTEIN into the house. The stage is now empty; we hear only their voices.

ROBESON (O.S.)

Medical maryjane! See, Albert, the world is progressing after all. On some fronts. It's what Marx called the interpenetration of opposites.

EINSTEIN (O.S.)

What's that, Paul?

We hear the scratches of a record starting up, very loud.

ROBESON (O.S.)

I said, where's that French brandy?

FRED (O.S.)

Coming up, gentlemen.

As the LIGHTS DIM, we hear ROBESON on record, singing "The International."

ROBESON (O.S.)

Ah, the old pipes. Not half so bad as I had feared.

EINSTEIN (O.S.)

Paul, you are too modest.

ROBESON (O.S.)

I've never been accused of that before, Albert.

EINSTEIN (O.S.)

You sound wonderful. And such a fine old song, too.

LIGHTS DOWN— THE END

“FRIED GREEN TOMATOES”

TERRY BISSON INTERVIEWED BY T. B. CALHOUN

Is writing a political project for you, or an artistic project?

I reject the distinction, at least for fiction. Though I have done a lot of straight propaganda writing. For several years I helped write and edit the newspaper of the John Brown Anti-Klan Committee. For me propaganda is about One Thing, in that case trying to encourage, indeed to build, an anti-racist resistance among white people. Everything was bent to that end. Fiction writing is by definition about complexity.

How did you get into writing? Was it something you always wanted to do?

Ever since I was a teen. I was seduced by the Beat Generation back in the 50s. They were in *LIFE* magazine and they were so cool. I wanted to get away, out of the South, out of the suburbs, indeed out of 50s America where I was born and raised.

I was always a reader but now I wanted to be Jack Kerouac. I even subscribed to the *Village Voice*.

I'm pretty sure I was the only subscriber in Owensboro, Kentucky.

What is your personal background?

Pretty conventional, middle class, small town Upper South but a liberal family. I was raised in the suburbs but my mother was one generation off the farm. I'm old enough to remember coal stoves and squirrel suppers, but I was raised in the new post-war suburbs, two cars and skinny trees. My father came from the North (Illinois). I was a TVA baby.

My Kentucky family was (and is) pretty liberal, from the days when the "solid south" was still Democratic. FDR brought them electric lights and concrete roads. Once in my twenties, home from New York, I tried (probably foolishly) to explain to a favorite aunt why I was a radical, a Marxist, an all-round anti-war hippie rebel. She nodded and said, "You are still a Democrat, though?"

I said sure.

Did you go to college?

English major. Very conventional. But committed. Literature was my thing by then. I ended up in New York, trying to sell a Kerouackian novel which never sold, and ended up working for romance magazines, softcore porn mags, astrology and western pulps, *Enquirer* type tabloids, low-end publishing in general. And discovered I liked it.

No science fiction?

SF was my first literature but I outgrew it, or so I thought. I wanted to be a serious novelist. I was working on a “serious” novel called *Eats Corpse for Rare Coin*, based on my experiences in the tabloids. The problem was, it kept getting short instead of longer. It was '68 and things were busting loose all over. I quit trying to write and joined up with the hippie movement in the Southwest.

No politics?

We were all political in those days, or so we thought. I went to all the anti-war demos, but I wasn't part of the organized Left. That came later. I spent a lot of time in hippie communes in the Southwest, and later back in Kentucky.

I didn't become actively political, in a real way, until the later 70s. I was one of those who got organized by the Weather Underground, by Prairie Fire and by the groups they organized after they broke up. My wife and I moved to New York and did a lot of work about Puerto Rican Independence. Then the John Brown Anti-Klan Committee. At the same time, I started writing again. And it turned out to be Science Fiction!

Go figure.

Ever write for comics?

My first paying free-lance stories were for *Creepy* and *Eerie*. I edited a comic mag, *Web of Horror*, for a while, and even wrote a series for DC. But I never liked the superhero stuff and never passed the “Marvel test.”

(Don't ask.) A couple of years ago I worked on a project with Stan Lee himself, but it came to naught.

Where did you get the idea for The Left Left Behind?

From France. A French writer and critic, Patrice Duvic, suggested that we work together on a book in which the world is a better place after the Rapture, minus all the Born-Agains. I thought it was a cool idea. Patrice had cancer and died before he could do much on the project, but the idea and the inspiration was all his.

I swiped the beginning of the story, the encounter with the prophet in Israel and the disappearances on the airliner, straight out of the *Left Behind* movie, then made up the rest. The ending, by the way, the scene on the train, is swiped almost word for word from R.A. Lafferty's wonderful utopian story "The Interurban Queen." Find it if you can.

Did you see the movie The Rapture? Did you like it?

Several times. A lot. It was written and directed by the great Michael Tolkin (who also wrote *The Player*). Mimi Rogers and David Duchovny, and a great ending. But much much darker than mine because it takes the idea seriously. See it!

You write a novel about John Brown, Fire on the Mountain. Did that come out of your work in the John Brown Anti-Klan Committee.

Totally. I became fascinated with the old man,

and visited Harper's Ferry and Kansas, where he fought a guerrilla war that prevented Kansas from entering the union as a slave state. Brown was not a nut, as the right would have it, or a martyr (as much of the Left sees him) who sacrificed his life for a just cause. He was in my view a seasoned and effective fighter who might have succeeded. My novel is about what if he had. And the nation of Nova Africa in my novel was inspired by the Republic of New Africa (the RNA), revolutionary Black nationalists dedicated to liberating the Deep South.

And there's yet another connection between the John Brown Committee and the John Brown book. I wrote the first two chapters while I was in federal prison.

For fighting the Klan?

For refusing to testify before a Grand Jury. The feds were looking for some folks who were still underground. Several of us in John Brown were subpoenaed and were jailed for contempt when we refused to talk. Not that we knew anything. We had a principle of non-collaboration — following the lead of the Puerto Ricans who had refused to “cooperate” with the search for the FALN. I only did three months; several others did more. But it gave me a start on the book, which was the most complicated thing I had done so far. I had to read a lot of history, and make up a lot more.

So it's not exactly a Science Fiction novel.

Sure it is. It's an alternate history, a what-if.

Plus I threw in a lot of wonky technology and even a trip to Mars. I even swiped a device from SF's

famous alternate history, Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*, which is about a post WWII America occupied by Germany and Japan. Dick has a novel in his novel about what might have happened if America had won the war. I have a novel in my novel, a right wing fantasy in which capitalism gets a new lease on life and America becomes a world power. A tragedy.

Alternate history has a long and respectable tradition in SF. Much of it is dystopian: The south wins the Civil War, the Nazis conquer England, etc.

Philip Roth wrote a cool one, *The Plot Against America*, in which Lindbergh and not FDR is elected president and the US becomes an anti-semitic fascist state. He didn't even know he was writing SF!

After that you ran a business called Jacobin Books.

Back in the 80s. My wife and comrade Judy and I ran a mail order business that catered mostly to prisoners. We would buy revolutionary books in English from Africa, Ireland, the Caribbean and here in the US, and mail them in to prisoners. Political prisoners like David Gilbert and Mumia Abu Jamal wrote reviews for our catalog. In those days prisoners had access to a little spending money, so it was a break-even operation. Not so easy today. The prisons are tighter than ever, and I doubt we'd even get the books in past the mail room.

All political books?

Mostly. Though Charles Mingus's *Beneath the Underdog* was a big seller. Assata's bio was big. Our bestseller was *Settlers: The Myth of the White Proletariat*. Every student of labor history should find and read that classic.

Have you ever been a union member?

I tried the National Writers Union (NWU) once. But alas, free-lance scribblers are independent contractors, including myself.

Do you miss your time as an activist and organizer?

Not so much. I was never good at mass work. I finally had to face the fact that I am, in fact, a petit bourgeois intellectual and make the most of it.

Have you written any traditional SF? You know, with a rocket ship on the cover?

Absolutely. Time travel, first contact, little shop stories, space travel. Even a robot or two. My latest novel, *Planet of Mystery* is about the first landing on Venus. I believe in knowing and respecting the conventions and traditions of your field, whatever it is. I think every rock band should be required to work up a version of "Johnny B. Good."

As a matter of fact, my next book after *Fire on the Mountain* had a BIG rocket on the cover. *Voyage to the Red Planet* is pretty standard space travel stuff with some elements of political satire, I suppose. In it, the first trip to Mars is financed by Hollywood.

Do you work on a regular schedule?

I try to; mornings. My novels have never made enough so I have always had to do pickup writing and editing on the side. What I call afternoon work. I wrote a bunch of novelizations (making a film script into a

book, which is sort of a backward project) and packaged a goofy series called *The No-Frills Books*. I did a car book with Click and Clack the Tappet Brothers (NPR). Working with them was fun. They hired me because I had mechanic experience and because I had once played in a bluegrass band, the Allen County Jumper Cables. I also wrote a biography of Nat Turner for “young adults” whatever that means. I’m still fond of that book, which is found in most libraries.

And you wrote a biography of Mumia Abu Jamal.

Ona Move. Mumia’s title. That was a labor of love, though it paid well too. I was lucky enough to meet Mumia back in the 80s, through a friend who was in prison with him. I visited, and we became friends. I helped him get his first book, *Live from Death Row* published. We still are friends, though I have seen him only once since I moved to California. He wrote the introduction to the new edition of *Fire on the Mountain* which PM is bringing out. He has been in solitary confinement for over twenty years.

And yet he continues, though his radio work and his writing, to be the “voice of the voiceless.”

And he is innocent.

And they know it. That’s the most shameful part.

Perhaps your most widely-read story is “They’re Made out of Meat.” It’s often found on the internet.

That’s cool. I like writing all-dialogue stories. I have done several. They tend to be short, although one

of them, “macs,” was longer. There is something about stories in which everything is revealed in dialogue that appeals to me.

Like a radio play?

Exactly. I have done several radio plays, and even got one produced at Radio City. But it’s way too hard to get anything produced on the radio. It’s a perfect venue for SF, but it seems all anyone wants to do is jokey retro stuff like Garrison Keilor’s “noir” detective. It’s a drag.

You worked as a mechanic. Was that a stretch for a literary guy?

Not at all. I have always loved cars, even big evil American cars, and I got back into working on them when I lived in the communes. There are always plenty of cars to fix. When my wife and I left the Southwest and moved back to Kentucky (she’s from Tennessee) I found myself working as a tractor mechanic, and then as a transmission man. I still do it but not enough. I miss the problem solving involved. It’s more intellectual than writing, which is a lot of guess-work.

Did your parents read to you?

Never. They were middle class but not bookish. There were no books around our house. I read to myself from an early age. I was lucky. I was taught to read before I went to school by a “colored” babysitter, Lily Mae, who helped me work out the words in Captain Marvel. Shazam — it made sense immediately. I went straight from comics into the *Oz* books, all thirty-some-

odd of them, then on to science fiction, which was easy to find on the drugstore racks. I remember getting a chill reading “Surface Tension” by Blish, probably my first genuine literary experience.

I still think *On the Road* is a great novel. Other early influences were James Ramsey Ullman and his biography of Rimbaud. A teacher gave me *Walden* and another turned me on to Beckett. All this was like honey to a sixteen-year-old in Kentucky.

Do you still regard yourself as a Southern writer?

Not really. Some of my early work was set in the South, particularly *Talking Man* which is about a hill-billy wizard, and “Bears Discover Fire,” a sweet little tale set in Bowling Green that won me my only Hugo. I still love and identify with the South, particularly the Upper Redneck Nascar South.

Darrel Waltrip and Jeremy Mayfield are both from my home town. But I can’t stand the “fried green tomatoes” sort of folksy hometown southmouth crap.

Where do your ideas come from?

From my butt. If I sit on it long enough in front of a word processor, I usually come up with something.

Have you ever written for movies?

I’ve done scripts. An independent producer hired me to write a film about Mumia, which is still being shipped around but with no success. The media is afraid of Mumia. I recently scripted a biopic of Paul Robeson, which is still in play but has never been produced. I

would love to see that film done. Robeson is the forgotten man of the civil rights movement. He was totally cast aside because of his politics—he was an unapologetic red and a steadfast friend of the Soviet Union at a time when that was verboten. They were careful not to include him in the March on Washington.

Is your interest in Robeson the source of your play Special Relativity?

No, the play was done long before the screenplay. My agent suggested I write something about Hoover's long-time harassment and hatred of Einstein. What I came up with was a comedy, sort of. I'm not sure Robeson would approve. I know Hoover wouldn't.

SF critic Nick Gevers once called you a satirist, and you insisted you are not. Who's right?

Gevers, probably. *The Left Left Behind* is certainly satire, and rather broad at that. So is "The Old Rugged Cross," though less broad; it's about a guy on death row who gets religion and insists on being crucified. But usually the satirical elements are secondary. I regard myself as a realist, really. Humor and satire are part of reality.

Aren't they?

Do you have favorite short story writers?

R.A. Lafferty, the late great SF writer, was a huge influence, though as writers we are very different. He's a singer; I'm a talker. Thom Jones is I think the best short story writer wiring in America today. Molly Gloss runs

a close second. Another favorite is David Sedaris who doesn't call his work short stories, though they are. He is sneaky.

You have hosted several SF reading series. How did that come about?

Luck, mainly. A good friend in NY, Mark Jacobson, a high-powered journalist (*NY mag*, *Village Voice*) put together a casual "non fiction" reading series for his fellow journalists who, unlike poets and the literati, rarely get to read in public. Mark pulled me in to help and it was fun. We got big names like David Remnick (before he took over the *New Yorker*) and Jummy Breslin and Jack Newfield, plus real-life pornsters, rock critics and wild punk gonzos. Mark knew everybody. Even Steve Earle came and read! We had a regular slot at KGB, a downtown literary bar. Alice Turner, my editor at *Playboy*, and I decided to try to same thing with fiction, and we teamed up SF writers with "straight" writers, and since Alice also knew everybody, we got Joyce Carol Oates reading with Lucius Shepard, Michael Cunningham with Rachel Pollack, Jonathan Lethem with Brett Easton Ellis. When Alice dropped out I teamed with Ellen Datlow, the premier SF editor, and we ran it as straight SF. Once a month, big names and small. When I moved to California in '02 I teamed up with Adam Cornford, a poet and professor at New College. Then New College folded and now the program, SFinSF, is sponsored by Tachyon Books. I get to be the "host" and that's fun as ever.

What's your advice to a wannabe writer?

The same advice Gary Snyder once gave to wannabe poets. Learn a trade. Plumber, carpenter, cook, mechanic. Learn how things fit together.

You have some experience teaching writing. Do you really think good writing can be taught?

Writing can be taught. The conventions of fiction: dialogue, point of view, timeline. Every writer should learn the baseline conventions. What can be taught about writing can be learned in a few months. Good writing is a different matter. It can be learned but not taught.

*Peter Coyote gave you lots of credit for editing his memoir, *Sleeping Where I Fall*. How did you get that job?*

Peter and I are old friends. We met in college and remained friends through the hippie commune Digger days, though we ran in different crowds. I was never part of the West Coast scene. Peter is a fine writer, he had already won a Pushcart Prize for a piece of the book, and only wanted another (colder) eye on how to shape the thing. That was me. It worked out well. I tried to get him to change the title, but Peter rejected all my bad ideas.

*You also worked on Walter Miller's sequel to *A Canticle for Leibowitz*.*

Alice Turner recommended me for the job. Miller had worked for years on the sequel to his classic bestseller,

but he was depressed and old and alcoholic besides, and he wanted somebody to finish the book according to his instructions. It was all there. All I had to do was land the thing, and the wheels were already down and it was lined up with the runway. I never got to meet Miller. He killed himself before *St. Leibowitz and the Wild Horse Woman* was finished.

Are these different skills — editing and writing?

Absolutely. The trick in editing is to stay out of the way. The editor should be invisible. I have edited several memoirs since Coyote's, mostly of old political comrades and friends. I edited Diana Block's book about being underground, *Arm the Spirit*. That was a pleasure. Also political prisoner David Gilbert's memoir. And I edited a serious nonfiction book, Dan Berger's history of the Weather Underground, *Outlaws of America*.

Does this mean you approve of the Weather Underground?

Very much. I came to know them late but I dug them from the beginning. Like the Panthers, they were young and foolish, and like the Panthers they restored militant internationalism to the American Left. The first time I saw them running through the crowd at the March on the Pentagon carrying a "Vietcong" flag, I thought, "Of course!"

How do you feel about anarchism?

As an idea I like it. But I am a big government guy. I'm a TVA baby. Still a Democrat.

Why are you raising your hand?

I thought of another satire. I wrote a story called “Pirates of the Somali Cast” a few years ago. I did it to make fun of all the people who thought pirates were cool (the Johnny Depp syndrome). I was unfair to the actual Somali pirates, though. In my satire I made them very very cruel and in fact, they are not, at least so far, or so it seems. Nothing to rival Guantanamo.

What do you think of hip-hop?

I think it’s sad. To me it’s a minstrel show. Saddest of all are the black intellectuals who celebrate it because it’s “authentic.” Lots of stuff is authentic.

How come there are no pirates in Pirates of the Universe?

Pirates are boring. The universe, on the other hand, is interesting.

You have written several books for young readers. Do you enjoy writing kids’ books?

Not particularly. I still get fan letters for my Boba Fett books though they were nightmare to write, since Lucas had to approve everything. I did a YA series about stock car racing that was even worse: NASCAR was trying to go mainstream and they killed all the hillbilly and redneck jokes. My adult characters couldn’t even chew tobacco or say ain’t. This was before NASCAR got hip and allowed *Talladega Nights*, the second funniest movie ever made.

What's the funniest?

Spinal Tap. Everybody knows that.

Other than Lucas and NASCAR, have you had any encounters with censorship?

Very few. SF is generally under the radar, which is one of the advantages to not being taken seriously by the media. I did have a hard time placing *The Left Left Behind*, and I suspect that's because it satirizes Israeli militarism. Christian fundamentalism is fair game but Israel is not.

You've been writing for some thirty-odd years. If you had it to do over what would you do?

Work harder. Learn to touch type. I still hunt and peck which is maybe why I am such a stingy writer. I always write short. My last two novels are novellas. This is not a career plan in SF.

Do you like fried green tomatoes?

Of course. Bourbon even better.

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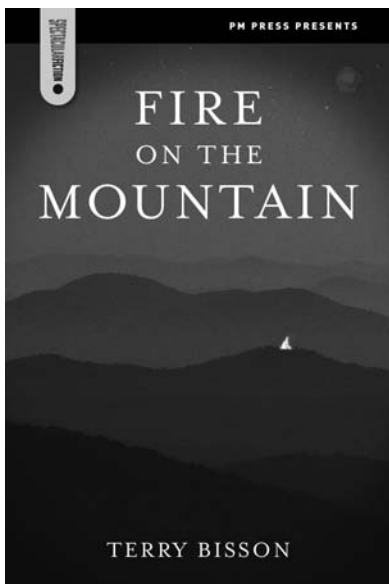
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A product of the New Left as well as the Old South, Terry Bisson has written for newspapers and magazines, film and stage, kids' books and comics, and worked as an editor and an auto mechanic. His alternate history of John Brown's raid, *Fire on the Mountain*, has just been republished by PM.



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It's 1959 in socialist Virginia. The Deep South is an independent Black nation called Nova Africa. The second Mars expedition is about to touch down on the red planet. And a pregnant scientist is climbing the Blue Ridge in search of her great-great

grandfather, a teenage slave who fought with John Brown and Harriet Tubman's guerrilla army.

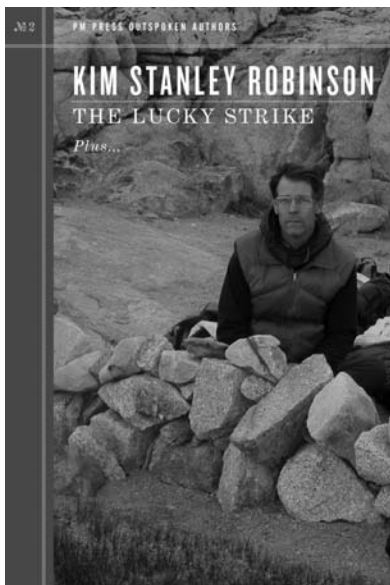
Long unavailable in the US, published in France as *Nova Africa*, *Fire on the Mountain* is the story of what might have happened if John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry had succeeded—and the Civil War had been started not by the slave owners but the abolitionists.

"You don't forget Bisson's characters, even well after you've finished his books. His *Fire on the Mountain* does for the Civil War what Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* did for World War Two."

— George Alec Effinger, winner of the Hugo and Nebula awards for *Shrödinger's Kitten*, and author of the *Marid Audran* trilogy.

"A talent for evoking the joyful, vertiginous experiences of a world at fundamental turning points."

— *Publishers Weekly*



PM PRESS OUTSPOKEN AUTHORS

The Lucky Strike

Kim Stanley Robinson

978-1-60486-085-6

\$12

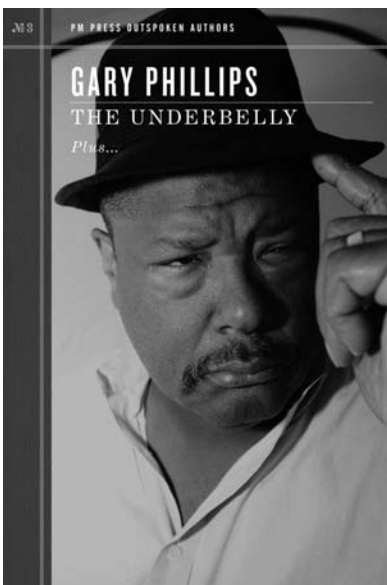
Combining dazzling speculation with a profoundly humanist vision, Kim Stanley Robinson is known as not only the most literary but also the most progressive (read “radical”) of today’s top rank SF authors. His bestselling “Mars Trilogy” tells the epic story of

the future colonization of the red planet, and the revolution that inevitably follows. His latest novel, *Galileo’s Dream*, is a stunning combination of historical drama and far-flung space opera, in which the ten dimensions of the universe itself are rewoven to ensnare history’s most notorious torturers.

The Lucky Strike, the classic and controversial story Robinson has chosen for PM’s new Outspoken Authors series, begins on a lonely Pacific island, where a crew of untested men are about to take off in an untried aircraft with a deadly payload that will change our world forever. Until something goes wonderfully wrong.

Plus: *A Sensitive Dependence on Initial Conditions*, in which Robinson dramatically deconstructs “alternate history” to explore what might have been if things had gone differently over Hiroshima that day.

As with all Outspoken Author books, there is a deep interview and autobiography: at length, in-depth, no-holds-barred and all-bets off: an extended tour through the mind and work, the history and politics of our Outspoken Author. Surprises are promised.



PM PRESS OUTSPOKEN AUTHORS

The Underbelly

Gary Phillips

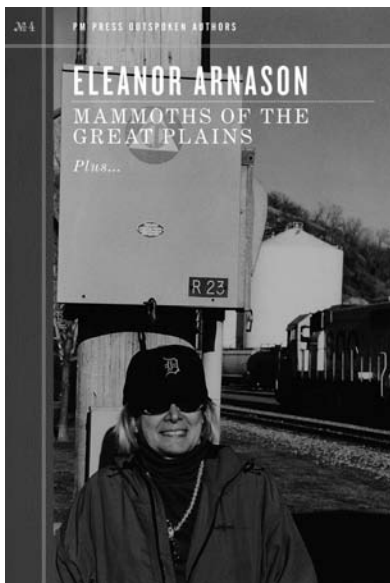
978-1-60486-206-5

\$12

The explosion of wealth and development in downtown L.A. is a thing of wonder. But regardless of how big and shiny our buildings get, we should not forget the ones this wealth and development has overlooked and pushed out. This is the

context for Phillips' novella *The Underbelly*, as a semi-homeless Vietnam vet named Magrady searches for a wheelchair-bound friend gone missing from Skid Row - a friend who might be working a dangerous scheme against major players. Magrady's journey is a solo sortie in which the flashback-prone protagonist must deal with the impact of gentrification; take-no-prisoners community organizers; an unflinching cop from his past in Vietnam; an elderly sexpot out for his bones; a lusted-after magical skull; chronic-lovin' knuckleheads; and the perils of chili cheese fries at midnight. Combining action, humor and a street level gritty POV, *Underbelly* is illustrated with photos and drawings.

Plus: a rollicking interview wherein Phillips riffs on Ghetto Lit, politics, noir and the proletariat, the good negroes and bad knee-grows of pop culture, Redd Foxx and Lord Buckley, and wrestles with the future of books in the age of want.



PM PRESS OUTSPOKEN AUTHORS

Mammoths of the Great Plains

Eleanor Arnason

978-1-60486-075-7

\$12

When President Thomas Jefferson sent Lewis and Clark to explore the West, he told them to look especially for mammoths. Jefferson had seen bones and tusks of the great beasts in Virginia, and he suspected—he hoped!—that they

might still roam the Great Plains. In Eleanor Arnason's imaginative alternate history, they do: shaggy herds thunder over the grasslands, living symbols of the oncoming struggle between the Native peoples and the European invaders. And in an unforgettable saga that soars from the badlands of the Dakotas to the icy wastes of Siberia, from the Russian Revolution to the American Indian Movement protests of the 1960s, Arnason tells of a modern woman's struggle to use the weapons of DNA science to fulfill the ancient promises of her Lakota heritage.

Plus: "Writing During World War Three," a politically uncorrect take on multiculturalism from an SF point-of-view; and an Outspoken Interview that takes you straight into the heart and mind of one of today's edgiest and most uncompromising speculative authors.

FRIENDS OF PM

In the year since its founding – and on a mere shoestring – PM Press has risen to the formidable challenge of publishing and distributing knowledge and entertainment for the struggles ahead. With over 40 releases in 2009, we have published an impressive and stimulating array of literature, art, music, politics, and culture. Using every available medium, we've succeeded in connecting those hungry for ideas and information to those putting them into practice.

Friends of PM allows you to directly help impact, amplify, and revitalize the discourse and actions of radical writers, filmmakers, and artists. It provides us with a stable foundation from which we can build upon our early successes and provides a much-needed subsidy for the materials that can't necessarily pay their own way. You can help make that happen—and receive every new title automatically delivered to your door once a month—by joining as a Friend of PM Press. Here are your options:

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- \$100 a month: Sustainer. - Everything plus PM merchandise, free downloads, and 50% discount on all webstore purchases.

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PM

PM PRESS was founded at the end of 2007 by a small collection of folks with decades of publishing, media, and organizing experience. PM co-founder Ramsey Kanaan started AK Press as a young teenager in Scotland almost 30 years ago and, together with his fellow PM Press coconspirators, has published and distributed hundreds of books, pamphlets, CDs, and DVDs. Members of PM have founded enduring book fairs, spearheaded victorious tenant organizing campaigns, and worked closely with bookstores, academic conferences, and even rock bands to deliver political and challenging ideas to all walks of life. We're old enough to know what we're doing and young enough to know what's at stake.

We seek to create radical and stimulating fiction and nonfiction books, pamphlets, t-shirts, visual and audio materials to entertain, educate and inspire you. We aim to distribute these through every available channel with every available technology - whether that means you are seeing anarchist classics at our bookfair stalls; reading our latest vegan cookbook at the café; downloading geeky fiction e-books; or digging new music and timely videos from our website.

PM PRESS is always on the lookout for talented and skilled volunteers, artists, activists and writers to work with. If you have a great idea for a project or can contribute in some way, please get in touch.

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