

acre in the sky

by . . . Robert F. Young

There is a quiet sensitivity to the work of Robert F. Young, which is reflected in vignettes such as this—describing the emotions of the man, waiting for the moment when he may, finally, leave for the stars. Mr. Young, who lives in upstate New York, has been a frequent contributor to F. U.

He used to look at her in a different way—in the days before the ship came. But now he turned his head away.

THE ship stood in the tril field, waiting.

She seemed taller than ever, Derth thought. It was as though she had grown during the night. He came out of the house and sat down on the steps, filling his eyes with her machined loveliness, her burnished beauty.

The morning wind, laden with the fragrance of canth blossoms, tiptoed down from the hills and touched his nostrils, but he was unaware of it. A kiddar hawk dropped out of the cobalt sky and soared over the changeless fields, but he did not see it.

His eyes caressed each contour of the tall, proud ship. A *Starmaid*, he thought dreamily. A *Starmaid De Luxe*. He still found it hard to believe that she was all his, from the tip of her haughty nose to the metallic soles of her wide, but graceful, landing feet.

Presently he became aware of Lorrie standing in the doorway be-hind 11m. He did not turn. He did not need to. He could see her large, sad eyes in her thin face without turning. He could see her gawky girl's body overburdened with child, the shapeless maternity dress that enshrouded the bloated remnants of her loveliness.

He heard her listless voice: "Shall I fix you something to eat, Derth?"

He did not take his eyes from the ship. "No. Not yet."

"But you didn't eat no breakfast and it's almost time for dinner. Ain't you hungry?"

"No, not hungry at all," he said. Then: "You get any pains yet?"

"Not yet, Derth. I expect to soon, though."

"How soon?"

"Just soon. I can't tell, you know that."

He was silent. He sat there motionless, his eyes clinging to the ship. After a while he heard Lorrie move away from the door and back into the house. His eyes fell away from the ship then, dropped to the sandy soil at his feet—the soil he had fought for years, forcing it to yield huge harvests in spite of it-self; fighting it, wheedling it, humoring it so that some day he might escape from it. And now that the day had come, he sat chained to his doorstep, while the splendid ship the harvests had bought stood imprisoned in the light of a single sun.

It was unbearable. He got up and walked over to the equipment shed, paused apathetically in the doorway. The auto-tractor and the cultivator and the picker stood in the gloom, gathering dust while they awaited their new master. The phosphorescent webs of arachnids shimmered in dark corners, hung on invisible filaments from the rafters. He turned away.

He heard the stuttering sound of a creeper, watched while the big wheeled vehicle turned from the highway into the sandy drive. Fen-wich, he thought. He waited till the huge machine came to a halt, then

walked over to where his neighbor was leaning out of the cab.

"Thought I'd stop by for a few words," Fenwich said. "On my way to the Commissary."

"Glad you did," Derth said.

"Guess you'll be leaving soon."

"Soon's we can."

"How's it feel to own a ship, Derth?"

Derth shifted his feet. "Feels all right," he said.

"I saw her when I came up the road. Couldn't take my eyes off her. Going to get one just like her, next harvest. How long'd you have to wait, Derth?"

"No time at all. They flew her direct from Earth to Goth. Set her down right in my backyard."

"And she can take you right up to the stars!" Fenwich shook his head. "It's kind of hard to believe. Are the stars very far, Derth?"

"Not for *her*. She travels in un-der space."

"How can she go in *under* it?"

"She just can, that's all I know. It says so in the book. You press the green button and under you go, and when you come up again, there's the star you picked on the picture."

"As easy as that!"

"Nothing to it. And every star in the picture has at least one dirt planet. Press another button and you land right on it."

"Which star you going to?"

"Don't know yet. There's hun-dreds of them open for settlers. Maybe I'll look them all over—if Lorrie ever has her baby."

"Can't leave till she does, huh?" "The Needle says the 'celeration would kill her."

Fenwich wagged his head. "Too bad," he said. "Too bad. And the ship sitting there, wasting, kind of . . . Well, got to make the Com-missary 'fore night." He depressed the reverse button. "See you, Derth. Maybe see you on the new acre. When I get *my* ship."

The creeper backed slowly across the yard. Derth watched it climb back onto the highway and move ponderously away beneath the cobalt vastness of the sky. When it was out of sight, he watched the empty road, standing listlessly in the dusty yard, his hands thrust deep into the pockets of his tril overalls.

That was all there was to do. Watch. The ship was bought and paid for, loaded and ready to go. And all he could do was stand in the sun and watch. And wait for Lorrie.

He kicked the dust with the toe of his field boot. The ship had come a whole week ago and he was sick and tired of waiting. Lorrie *must* be overdue, no matter what the Needle said. Why, she was as big as a milch bront—any-body could see that. How much bigger could she get? How much uglier?

He kicked the dust again, then turned abruptly and started across the fields. His feet sank into the sandy loam, making each step an ordeal, but he persisted. Anything was preferable to sitting around the house for another monotonous day.

Before him, a ruffle of canth--clad hills briefly interrupted the monotony of the landscape. They were little more than dunes, actual-ly: wind-piled remnants of the des-ert days before man had come with his scrapers and diggers and engi-neering ingenuity and joined the antipodal seas with a vast network of irrigation ditches. When he reached the nearest one, Derth climbed halfway up its verdant slope and sank down to rest.

The heavy perfume of burgeon-ing canth was all around him. It cloyed his nostrils, making him giddy. He lay back amid the green vines and the blue blossoms, pil-owing his head upon his clasped hands.

He looked back across the fields at the ship.

The sun had caught her com-pletely and she stood against the sky like a lithe goddess in a gleam-ing golden gown. Derth gasped in-voluntarily, struggling with his new perspective. He had never seen her quite like this before—so poised, so exquisite, so alive with light. Up till now, he had always been close to her. Ever since the day she'd arrived, he'd never wandered far from her side. Too, there was a certain intimacy connected with polishing her flanks, with inspecting, over and over, the complex interior of her body: an intimacy that had made it impossible for him to see her in quite the same way as he saw her

now. The cobalt sky seemed deeper than ever, the sun warmer. He lay lazily in the canth, eyes half closed. The afternoon dreamed slowly by . . .

The hills had acquired long shad-ows when he started back. There was a strange lightness about his body, and his legs no longer mind-ed the softness of the fields. When he came to the ship (she wore a coppery gown now), he paused be-side her, staring up at her tower-ing, magnificent body. He reached out to touch the hem of her gown—

"Derth!"

The illusion disintegrated. His hand dropped to his side.

"Derth!"

He turned toward the house. His cheeks were burning. Lorrie was standing on the steps, thin, gro-tesque, misshapen. Sudden hatred suffused him. "What you want!" he shouted.

"It's time for supper . . . Derth, I've called you three times. What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing!" He started toward the house, stomping his feet hard.

Lorrie had reentered the kitchen and was standing by the stove. "I got some openeye brewed," she said. "Are you hungry yet, Derth?"

He dropped his eyes. "Not hun-gry at all," he said.

"What's the matter with you, Derth? You sick? You never eat no more—"

"When a man don't work he just don't get hungry." Derth sat down at the table and took the cup of openeye she handed him. He stirred it absently, staring into its liquid blackness.

Lorrie sat down opposite him. "Derth, why don't you look at me no more?"

Startled, he raised his eyes. He could feel his cheeks burning again. She was regarding him intently and his eyes wanted to run away. It was all he could do to keep them on her face.

"Am I ugly now, Derth?"

"Course not, Lorrie!"

"You used to look at me—before the ship came. At least you looked at me a little bit. Now you don't look at me at all."

"Lorrie, I got lots on my mind. I don't have *time* to look at you as much as I used to."

"But you're not working. You just sit around all day and mope and brood and—"

"I'm thinking, Lorrie! Think-ing . . ." He was talking desper-ately. Somehow he couldn't stand to see her cry. "Thinking of that acre we're going to find up in the stars. Why, it'll have dirt so rich our tril will grow as high as clouds. We'll build a house with two sleeping rooms, maybe even *three*. And there won't be no snooping Needle coming around every week, jabbing us in the arm and making us take fever pills. Just think of that, Lorrie!"

Her eyes were clearing, though minute particles of moisture glis-tened among the lashes. "I guess it *will* be wonderful, won't it," she said wistfully.

"Wonderful! I guess so! And we'll have a special piece of ground where we'll keep the ship. Right next to the house, maybe. And she'll be standing there waiting, waiting to take us wherever we want to go, whenever we want to go. Standing there, tall and fine and shining—"

"But I thought that after we got to where we're going we were go-ing to sell her."

"*Sell* her!" Derth stood up. He crashed his fist hard on the table. "You crazy, Lorrie? Why I'd never think of selling her. I—"

"But Derth, you said before you bought her you were going to sell her to help outfit the new acre!"

"Lorrie, I never did!"

"Yes, you did, Derth."

"I must have been crazy then. Stark crazy! Now what are you crying for!"

"I—I don't know, Derth. I'm—I'm scared of something. Some-thing I don't understand."

He sat there, sickened. The tears made straggly streaks on her pinched face. Her thin shoulders shook. After a while he forced him-self to get up and walk around the table. He touched her hair. "Don't cry, Lorrie," he said. "There's noth-ing to cry about."

"I can't help it. Something's happened to you, Derth."

"Nothing's happened to me, Lorrie." He patted her shoulder, recoiled inwardly from its boni-ness.

"You don't love me no more. There's somebody else."

"But how *could* there be anyone else? There isn't anyone else around. Not for miles and miles and miles."

"Sometimes I hear you get up in the night and walk around, and then I hear you go outside. Some-times I think you're never coming back to bed. Where do you go, Derth?"

He felt the sudden hotness of his face. It was difficult for him to speak, to go on pretending. He had waited too long, that was the trouble. He never should have waited in the first place. Presently: "I keep thinking of the new acre," he said. "Like I told you. Some-times I get thinking so hard I can't sleep and I have to get up and walk around, and go outside and sit on the steps. What's wrong with that? What's wrong with that, Lorrie?"

She did not answer, but her shoulders slowly quieted.

"You're all nerved up 'cause of the baby," he went on quickly. "Soon's you have it, we'll find our new acre and stake it out and every-thing'll be fine. Fine as tril."

"Do you think so, Derth?"

"I know so! Come on now, let's go to bed."

He helped her up, trying not to notice her awkward body, trying not to see her tear-stained face. But it wasn't any good.

He knew, suddenly, that he was not going to wait any longer.

He lay on his back without mov-ing. He lay there for a long time. It grew dark in the room, then, after a while, it grew light again, as Goth's huge moon edged above the horizon.

Lorrie was a dim mound beside him, emitting soft breathing sounds. He was careful not to move till the breathing sounds became deep and even, and then, when he finally did move, he moved sur-reptitiously, slipping from beneath the covers and dressing in the pale darkness. He packed his things si-lently, then felt his way from the room. When he opened the kitch-en door, a shower of silver rain engulfed him.

He stood on the steps, breath-less.

He could see her clearly in the unreasonable light. She was wear-ing a silver gown. She was tall and clean-cut, lithe, graceful, magnifi-cent; a bewitching goddess of stars, standing in the moonlight, waiting—
Waiting to abscond with him. He ran toward her across the fields, arms outstretched.